

# Ballpoint



## **Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950**

Rita Ackermann, Bill Adams, Alighiero Boetti, Dawn Clements, Russell Crotty, Jan Fabre, Alberto Giacometti, Joanne Greenbaum, Martin Kippenberger, Il Lee, and Toyin Odutola

Curated by Richard Klein

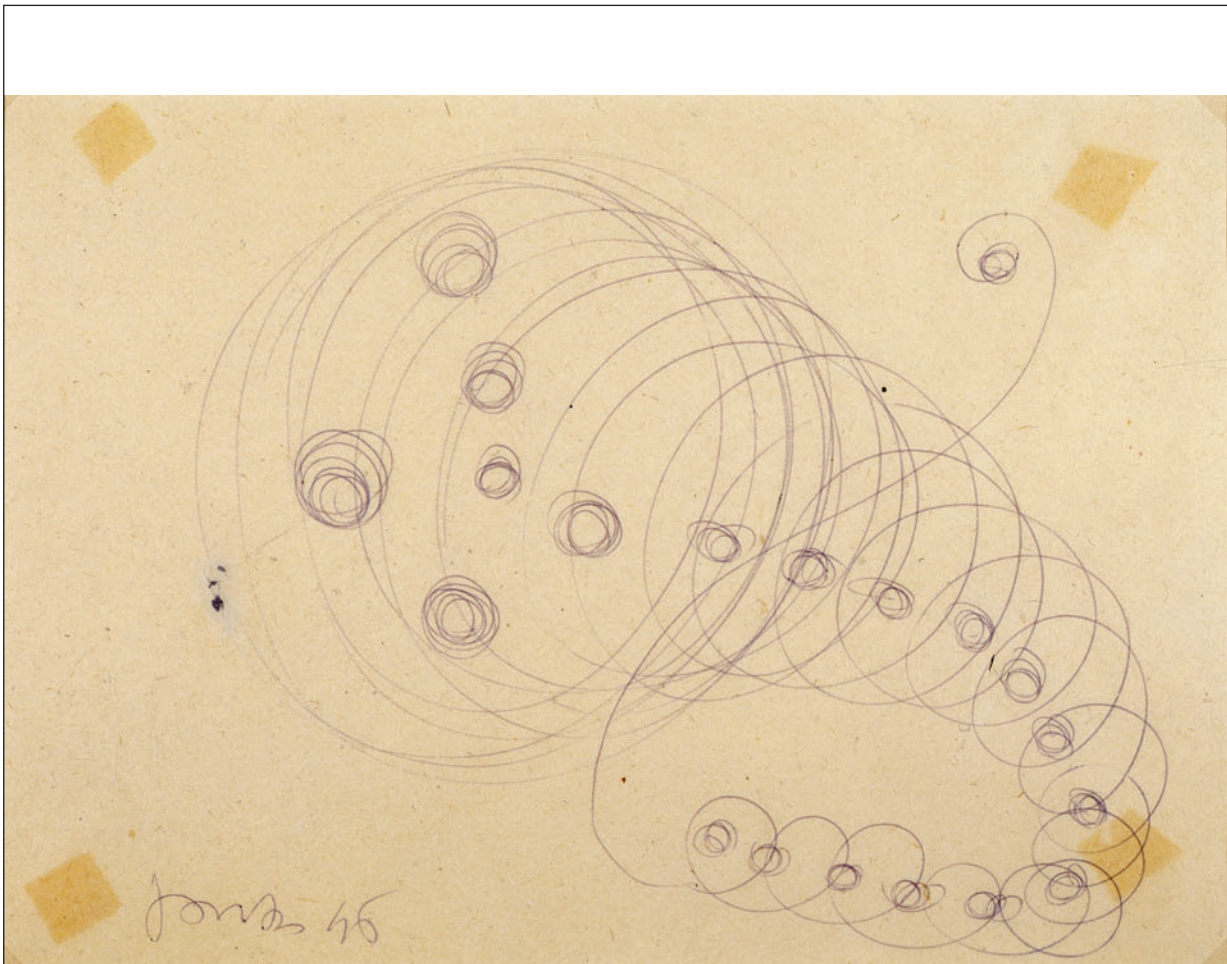
March 24 to August 25, 2013

**The Aldrich** Contemporary Art Museum

## Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950

Conceived at the end of the nineteenth century, perfected in the 1930s, and popularized after World War II, the ballpoint pen has become an indispensable part of everyday life. Widely condemned for transforming handwriting from the lofty craft of penmanship to an indifferent scrawl, the ballpoint as a tool has contributed to the rapid acceleration of life in the modern world, allowing the hand to move with careless speed and efficiency. Designed as a replacement for the fountain pen, which was essentially a quill pen with the addition of an ink reservoir, the ballpoint is really a tiny, precision machine that owes its existence to twentieth century technical advances in micro-manufacturing, metallurgy, and chemistry. Bic, the French manufacturer who helped to popularize the ballpoint, currently sells over 15 million of its iconic “Cristal” pens every day worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Art does not immediately come to mind when one considers the ballpoint. In fact, the general consensus that the pen contributed to a decline in the craft of handwriting suggests that any marks made with it are lifeless and boring. As late as 1970, calligrapher and handwriting historian Alfred Fairbank wrote, “Ballpens are not recommended for good writing.”<sup>2</sup> The English novelist, critic, and journalist Philip Hensher says in his book on the downfall of handwriting, *The Missing Ink*, “I was deeply, inexplicably shocked the first time I saw one of Joseph Beuys’s drawings executed in blue ballpoint pen—the medium and the color clearly and unarguably limited to doodling in a meeting, not for something to be exhibited in a gallery.” Walter Koschatzky, esteemed art historian and director of the graphics collection of the Albertina Museum in Vienna, disparaged the character of the ballpoint pen in his 1977 book *Die Kunst der Zeichnung: Technik, Geschichte, Meisterwerke (The Art of Drawing: Technology, History, Masterpieces)*, “Pressing the point of the pen down produces no change in the thickness of the line; consequently there is no differentiation of line in hair-thin and hatching ... [therefore] its use in art is virtually nil. Drawings done with a ball-point pen always exhibit a deadness of line.”



Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale*, 1946

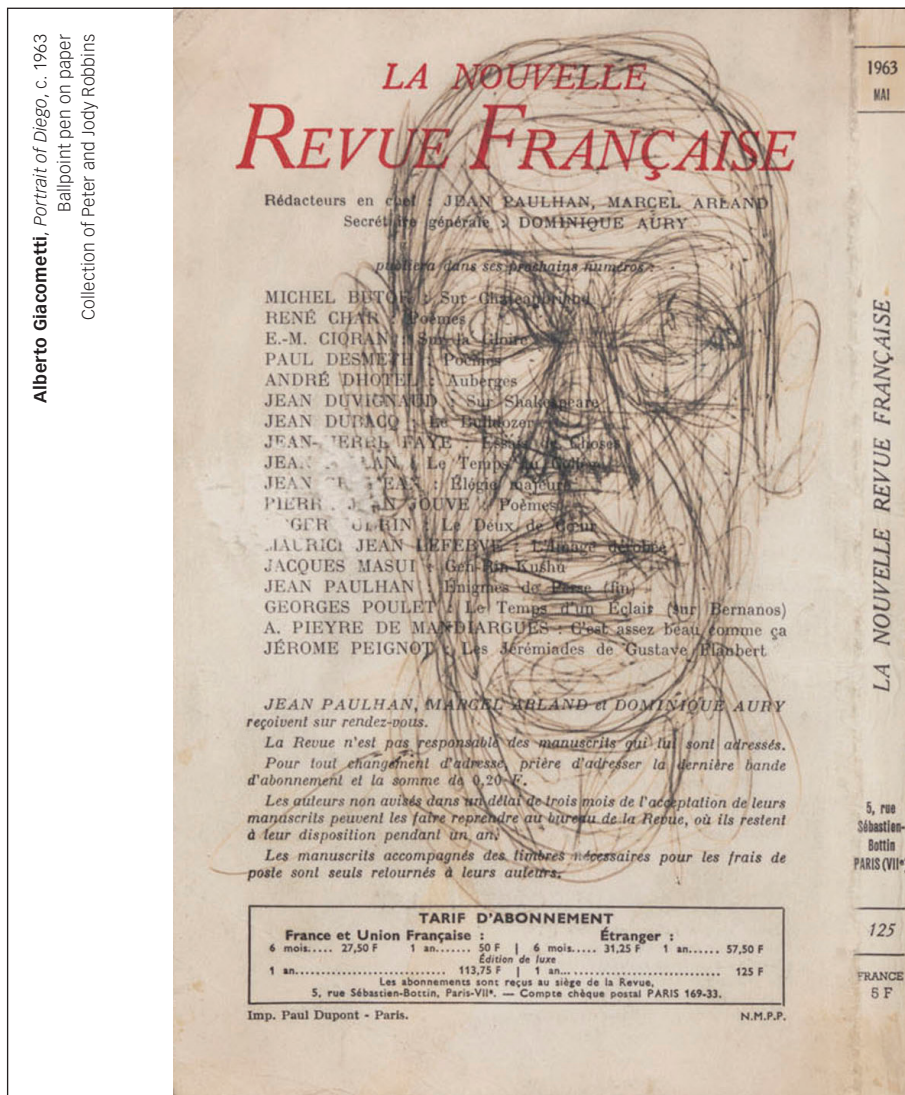
7 61/64 x 10 53/64 inches

Blue ballpoint pen on paper

Archive #844/12, Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milano

Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milano

Alberto Giacometti, *Portrait of Diego*, c. 1963  
Ballpoint pen on paper  
Collection of Peter and Jody Robbins



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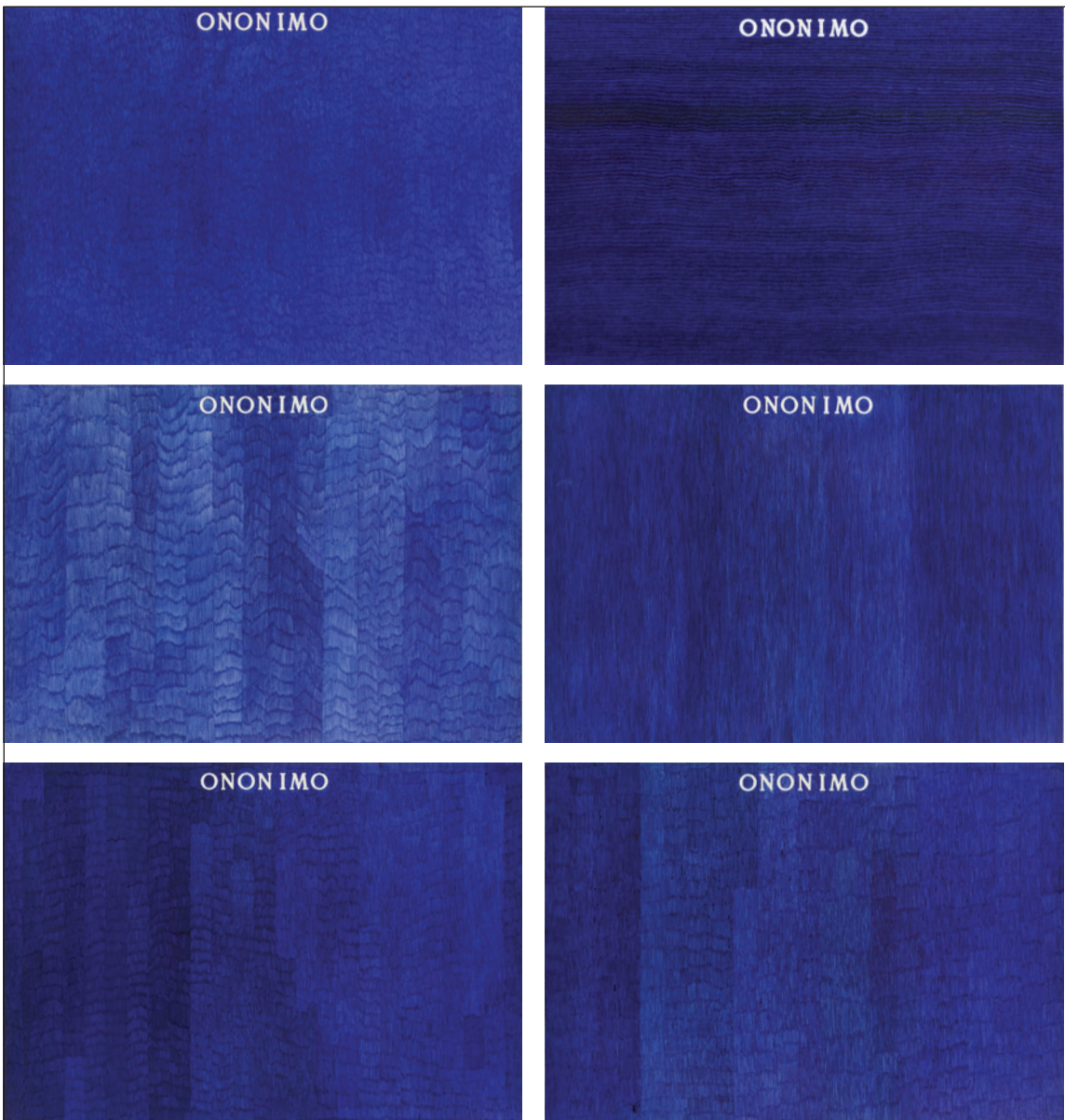
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The narrative of the ballpoint's appropriation by artists starts with a convergence of technology and culture that is too propitious to be mere coincidence. The pen, as we recognize it today, was invented by Laszlo Biro,<sup>3</sup> a Hungarian who in 1940 fled the Second World War to find refuge in Argentina. With the backing of financier Andor Goy, Biro perfected his design and the ballpoint went into limited production in Buenos Aires in 1941.<sup>4</sup>

The flood of refugees leaving Europe for Argentina in 1940 included the Argentinian-born artist and theorist Lucio Fontana, who had been living in Italy. Fontana's influences included the Italian Futurists, who vehemently advocated for a new approach to art that embraced the machine age with a radical, technophile fervor. In Buenos Aires, Fontana began his conceptualization of a new art movement, coined Spatialism, which went beyond the anarchy of Futurism to unite art and science in a visionary manner that looked forward to the new "space age" that was being promised for the post-war world. Fontana was one of the first artists to work with neon and black light, as well as envisioning works utilizing television as a medium.

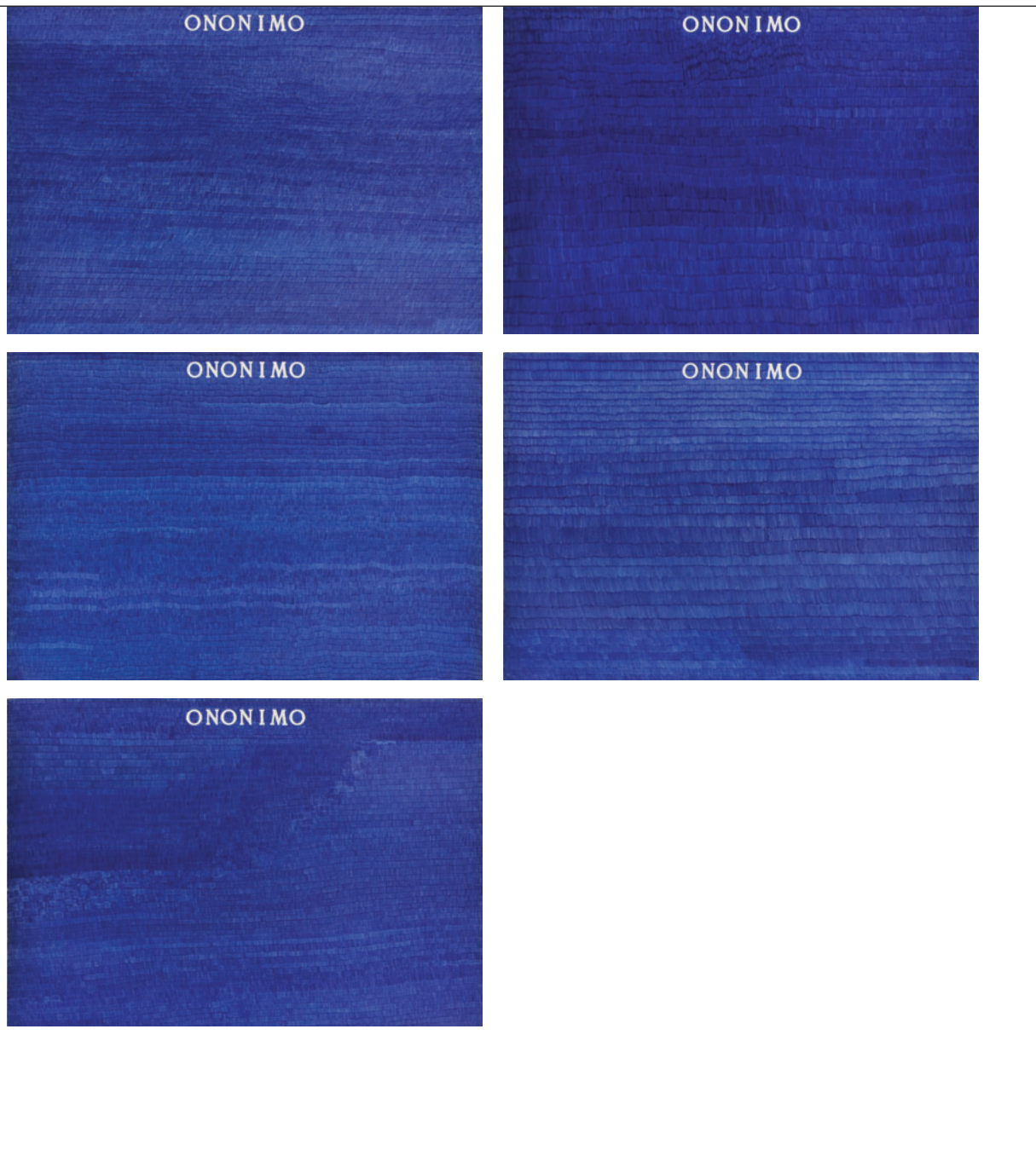
During the early 1940s, Biro's ballpoint was heavily marketed in Argentina. Attention on the pen and its attributes was heightened by an order from the United States Air Force for twenty thousand pens, based on its ability to not leak at high altitudes. Ballpoints were promoted as the pen of the future, while fountain and cartridge pens were denigrated as old-fashioned and obsolete. Fontana took up drawing with the ballpoint in 1946,



**Alighiero Boetti**, *Ononimo*, 1973  
Ballpoint pen on card; eleven parts  
Collection of Gian Enzo Sperone, New York  
Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

making sketches and preliminary drawings for works to be completed in other media. His drawings from this period exhibit a continuity of line and a speed that was made possible by the pen's nature, which offered a new kind of freedom to the kinesthetics of the human hand. It is interesting to note that the signature works for which Fontana become so well known a decade later—canvases with precise cuts “drawn” on their surfaces—were made with utility knives, another industrially-made, non-art tool that became popular in the post-war world.

In 1951 the Bic Cristal was introduced in both Europe and America, quickly becoming the most popular and inexpensive ballpoint available. Almost overnight the pen went from being a rather costly luxury item to a mass-marketed consumer commodity that was available anywhere and everywhere. This was the era of Abstract Expressionism, where the hand of the artist was considered a seismograph that directly and spontaneously



transmitted the artist's unconscious thoughts and feelings. A huge premium was put both on being painterly and on the timelessness of the artist's mark. The ballpoint, being perceived as not only lacking authenticity but also being a product of mass culture, was regarded as rather soulless, and was not taken up with great enthusiasm by artists in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

One notable exception was Alberto Giacometti, an artist not connected with the trend towards abstraction. Giacometti started using the ballpoint for figure drawing in the early 1950s when the pen began its climb to ubiquity, and he completed numerous small works with the pen up to the time of his death in 1966. Many of these drawings were done on either pages or covers taken from books and periodicals, with the text referencing Giacometti's literary interests. Looking at these drawings, one is tempted to say that his style had been waiting for the appearance of the ballpoint: the artist's approach of defining

the figure through a restless and quickly scribbled cloud of linear mark-making was a perfect match for the pen's fluidity. These drawings, done on top of found texts, have the nonchalant character of *gribouillage* (doodling), portending the pen's future use by artists such as Martin Kippenberger and Joanne Greenbaum.

In the 1960s, a significant number of artists used ballpoint as a drawing tool in varying degrees, including Cy Twombly, Dan Flavin, Barry Le Va, and Hanne Darboven. This use of the pen was connected to the idea-driven nature of much sixties art and its renunciation of conventional aesthetics, which included minimizing or eliminating the art object and an interest in both language and text. Darboven's drawings, which resemble gridded, numerical ledger book entries, are mathematical tables based on a personal system derived from calendar dates. Conceptually rigorous, her graph-like ballpoint drawings made use of the anonymous nature of the ballpoint as an everyday notational tool. In all of these examples from the 1960s, the pen was relegated to a rather prosaic role, reflecting interest in non-traditional subject matter as well as rejection of optical beauty.

Fontana was a major influence on a group of Italian artists in the late 1960s that made up Arte Povera ("poor art"), a loosely organized movement that reflected the social, political, and cultural upheaval of the era. The artists connected to Arte Povera embraced unconventional materials—particularly found objects—to question prevailing hierarchies and aesthetics. Alighiero Boetti, who was affiliated with Arte Povera, made his first drawings exclusively with ballpoint in the early 1970s. Guided by a belief that artists should work with preexisting materials in order to connect with everyday life, Boetti embraced the ballpoint not only for its ubiquity, but also for its commonplace beauty. It is one thing to draw with a ballpoint in a manner that resembles handwriting, but another to fill up entire sheets of paper with oceanic fields of dense marks, and Boetti's drawings with the pen are the first to dramatically revel in the unmistakable blue of ballpoint ink. Throughout the 1970s, Boetti completed numerous, large-scale ballpoint drawings, delegating the actual mark-making to teams of students in Rome. In multipart works, such as *Ononimo*, an anonymous individual completed each sheet, with the teams working on them equally divided between men and women. These laborious and monumental ballpoint drawings bring to life two of Boetti's working principles: "Putting the world in the world" and "Giving time to time."

The narrative of the ballpoint's ascendancy to acceptance continues in the late 1970s with the Belgian artist Jan Fabre. Fabre is the first artist to totally embrace the pen as a medium, completing hundreds of ballpoint works between 1977 and 1992, with drawings varying in scale from the intimate to the architectural. Fabre, who besides being a visual artist is also a theater artist and author, has a complex career based on a poetically romantic sensibility that has consistently explored the relationship between the physical and spiritual nature of the world. This interest in the tangible and the intangible led Fabre to create a body of work that focused on the metaphoric nature of the transitional period between night and day, what he refers to as "The Hour Blue," that mysterious half-light world that mediates between the realm of reason and that of dreaming. In the ballpoint, Fabre found a perfect vehicle for expressing this dichotomy, taking "Bic blue" and transforming its humble materiality into a transcendent experience. In the work *Tivoli* (1990), Fabre completely covered an early nineteenth-century castle in Mechelen, Belgium, with blue ballpoint pen, dematerializing a massive stone building through an act of painstaking labor. The Tivoli project is represented in this exhibition by two photographs of the castle—one during the day, and one at night—with their surfaces completely inked over with blue ballpoint.



For individuals born after the beginning of the 1950s, the ballpoint has been like the ocean to fish; a reality that is ever present and practically invisible. You, the reader of this essay, have probably held a ballpoint in your hand at some point earlier today, perhaps using it to doodle on the margins of the agenda of that tiresome meeting or to sign the Visa receipt for your lunch. For many artists, this state of affairs has created a situation where the ballpoint has become the vernacular go-to tool that can be coaxed out of its supposedly limited nature to perform a seemingly unlimited range of aesthetic roles, becoming in many ways the pencil of our era. The past thirty years has seen the ballpoint taken up by an uncategorizable range of artists, with the results spanning the abject to the sublime.

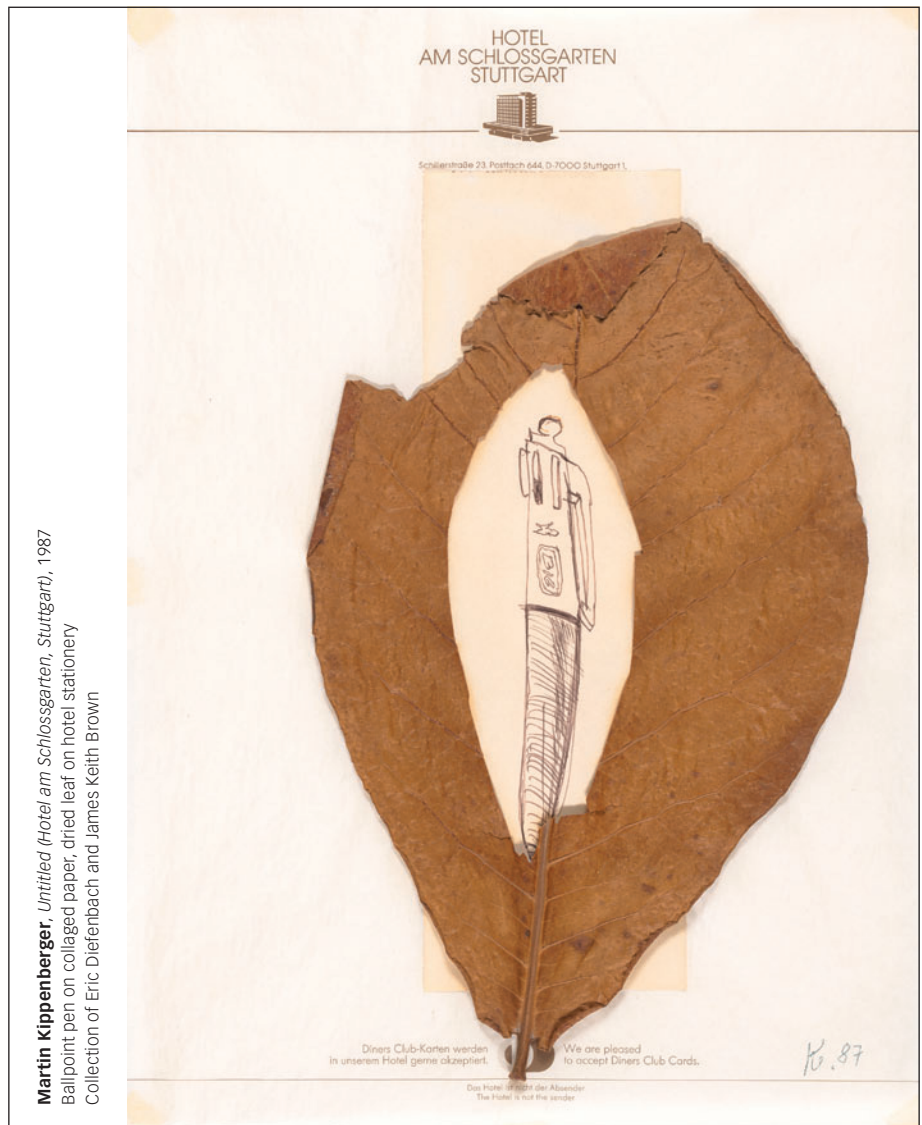
This ubiquity of the pen, its always-in-arm's-reach nature, was used to great effect by German artist Martin Kippenberger in his series of "hotel drawings" begun in 1987. The hotel drawings are done in a great variety of media, with ballpoint making a frequent appearance along with felt tip, transfer lettering, and more traditional materials such as watercolor and pen and ink. Created by the artist to bring order to a practice that was frequently nebulous, Kippenberger's consistent use of hotel stationery as a drawing ground provided a through line in his work over the last ten years of his life. The series includes preliminary drawings for major works, as well as hundreds of stream-of-consciousness drawings that exhibit an offhand, surrealistic humor and frequent use of both visual and verbal puns. Hotel stationery suggests the spontaneity of doodling while on the phone,

yet the majority of Kippenberger's hotel drawings are carefully considered. The drawing *Untitled (Hotel am Schlossgarten Stuttgart)* that is in this exhibition includes a rendering of a Bic pen, presumably the tool that was used in its making.

In contrast to Kippenberger's ad hoc and sporadic use of the ballpoint, Il Lee has developed a body of work over the past thirty years that has been entirely rendered with either blue or black ballpoint. Lee has defined a new role for the pen, that of a discipline, where he has taken the pen's seemingly endless ability to make a continuous and fluid line to a masterful level that transcends the pen's pedestrian associations. Lee's large-scale ballpoint abstractions might bring to mind the fluid calligraphy of Jackson Pollock, but they owe as much of a debt to traditional Asian ink drawing, a medium that bridges the gap between calligraphy and representation in Asian culture. Lee, who was born in Korea, came to New York in the late 1970s, earning an MFA that culminated in a thesis on the Italian Futurists. Echoing Fontana's early Futurist infatuation, Lee was attracted to the movement by its premium on speed and dynamism, both factors that are reflected in the his ballpoint works. The ballpoint lines that compose Lee's drawings resemble the marks on ice made by a speed skater—the record of a virtuosic physical performance that exhibits no hesitation or doubt.<sup>6</sup>

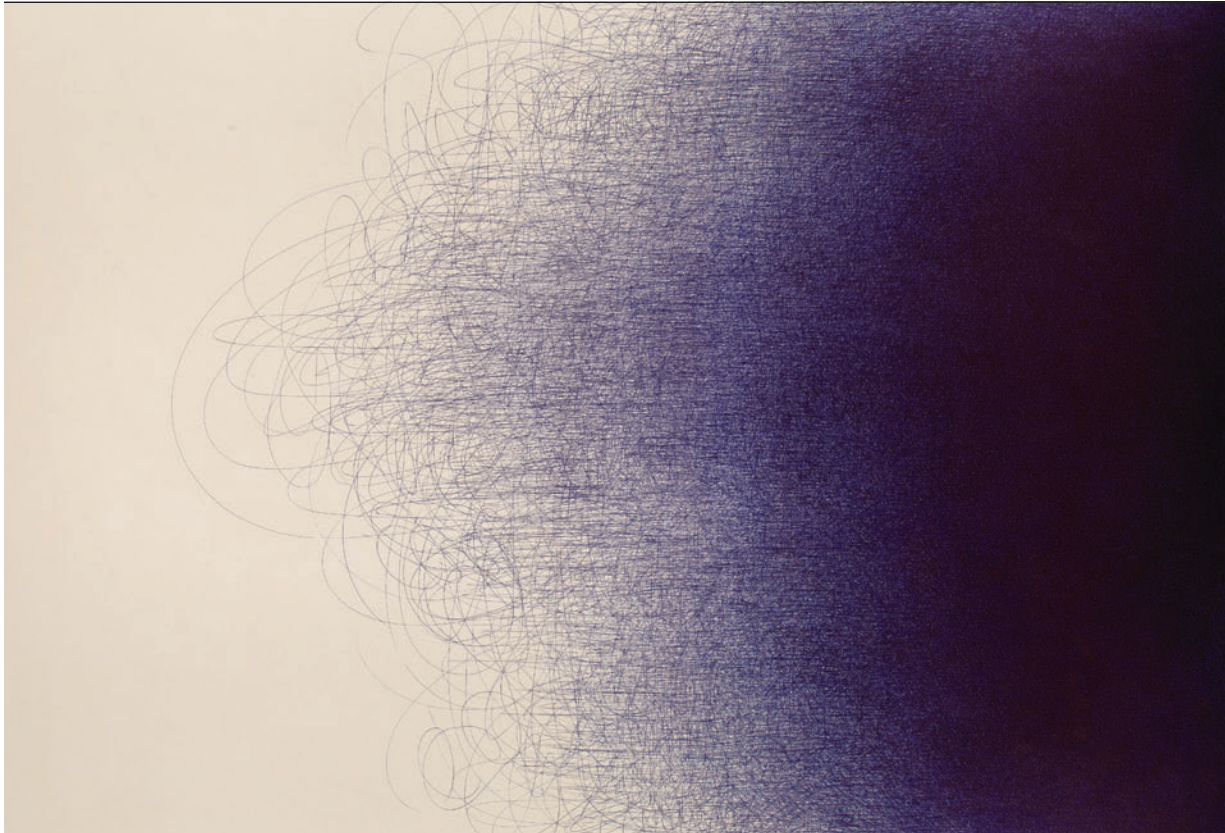
The ballpoint abstractions of Joanne Greenbaum exist at the midpoint of the extremes posed by Kippenberger and Lee, combining the spontaneity and casualness suggested by

Il Lee, *BL-120*, 2011  
 Ballpoint pen on canvas  
 Courtesy of the artist and Art Projects International, New York



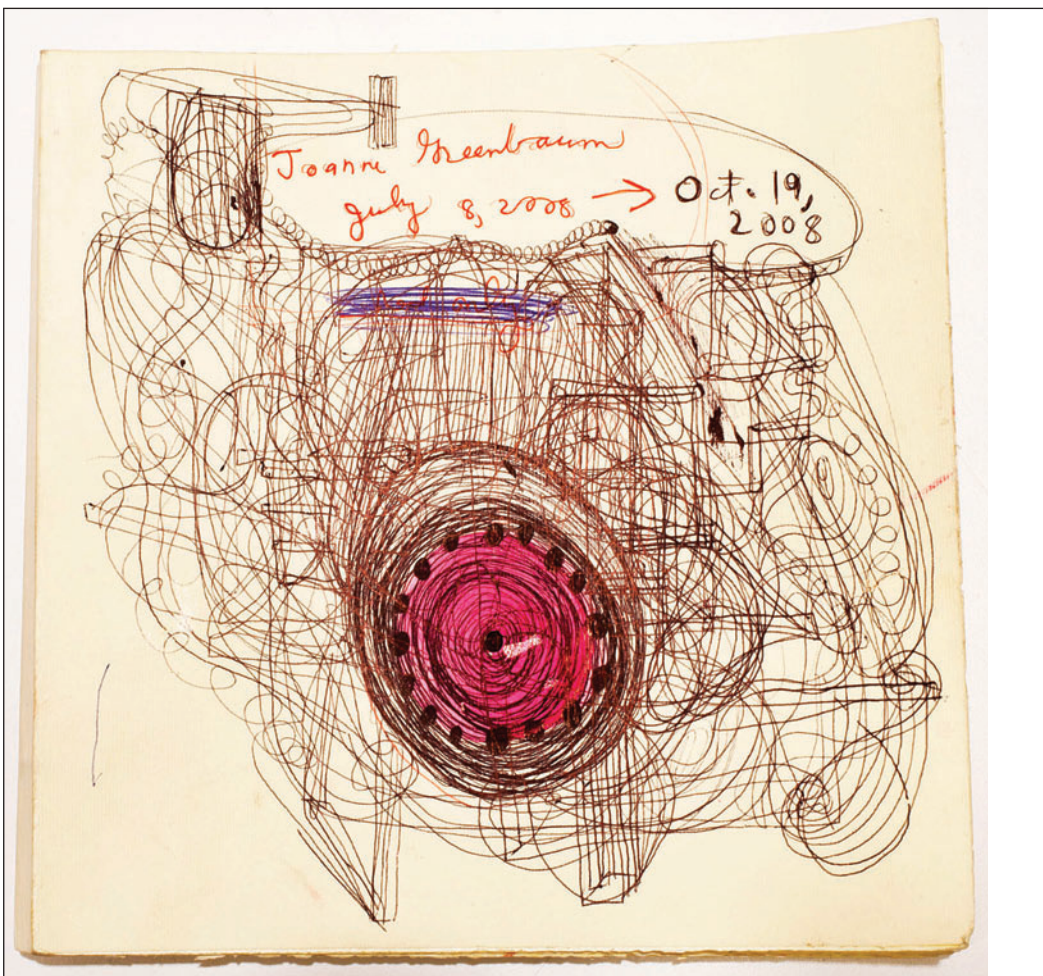
Martin Kippenberger, *Untitled (Hotel am Schlossgarten, Stuttgart)*, 1987  
 Ballpoint pen on collaged paper, dried leaf on hotel stationery  
 Collection of Eric Diefenbach and James Keith Brown





the pen with a consistent, focused discipline. Greenbaum, although known primarily as a painter, bases much of her practice in a hardcore drawing sensibility that borders on the obsessive, a position that has led to the production of over one hundred sketchbooks featuring ballpoint as a medium since the early 1990s. More than any artist in this exhibition, Greenbaum has integrated the ballpoint into her everyday life, going as far as to work on her sketchbooks while watching television, a situation which has helped free her process from conscious decision, allowing for the production of some of her most sincere and idiosyncratic ballpoint drawings. Ballpoint is clearly the major vehicle for aimless and casual scribbling in the modern world, and Greenbaum has taken this aspect of the pen's nature and amplified its inventive potential in the service of high art abstraction. Greenbaum's sketchbooks are humanized by frequent pauses for note taking; including "to do" lists and contact information for friends and acquaintances. As seemingly casual as Greenbaum's ballpoint drawing are, she takes the medium seriously, only using pens with archival ink. Testifying to the increased popularity of the pen for art making and a concern for its longevity, there are now numerous archival ballpoints,<sup>7</sup> and Greenbaum has gravitated to a Schmidt P900B, manufactured in Germany.

Russell Crotty started drawing with ballpoint as a child, making hundreds of line drawings that reflected his life in rural northern California. He took up surfing at an early age, and many of his early drawings were pictographs of stick figures riding the crests of doodle-like waves, or simple renderings of the region's numerous sawmills. For an artist with ability, art school of course meant painting, and Crotty took up the medium but was by and large



**Joanne Greenbaum**, *Artist Book (cover)*, 2008  
Ballpoint pen on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and D'Amelio Gallery, New York

dissatisfied with the results. In the 1980s, the growing plurality of the art world led to increased interest in breaking down the barriers between high art and the vernacular, a situation that led to the acknowledgment of the importance of graffiti and the increasing integration of comics and cartoons into art making. Reflecting the spirit of the times, Crotty returned to the ballpoint as a primary medium, describing the drawings from the period as “glorified doodles.” Taking the minimalist grid as a compositional format, Crotty created drawings (some of them huge) composed of tiny cells, each filled in with simple ballpoint renderings of things such as smokestacks, breaking waves, and vernacular architecture like Pacific coast beach shacks. Crotty is also a serious amateur astronomer, and some of his grid drawings from the period are inventories of astronomical phenomena, such as the changing face of Mars viewed over time. Crotty’s use of ballpoint for astronomical observation was not just based on aesthetic preference, but also practicality: the ballpoint allowed rapid drawing outdoors at nighttime without worrying about smudging (ballpoint ink dries almost instantaneously). Initially, Crotty’s detailed astronomical drawings were round, due to a telescope’s circular field of view, and in the late 1990s he began making them truly in the round, on fiberglass spheres covered with paper. The inclusion of handwritten text has been a gradual process, starting in the 1980s with captions in artist’s books whose subject was surfing, as separate notational text in his astronomy “atlases,” and the recent inclusion of text as strata in the landscape, offering poetic commentary on the locations portrayed.



**Russell Crotty**, *Watch the Dolphins Play*, 2007  
Ballpoint pen, watercolor on paper on fiberglass sphere  
Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, New York

The character of ballpoint drawing is not just based on the rolling ball tip itself, but also on the unique qualities of ballpoint ink. Lazlo Biro spent as much time, if not more, on the formulation of the ink as he did on the mechanical engineering, as the rolling ball necessitated a free-flowing ink that did not dry on the ball and clog the pen. Most ballpoint inks are dye based,<sup>8</sup> not pigment based, because the extremely minute space between the ball and its surrounding metal ferrule precludes anything from passing that isn't uniformly smooth-textured. The character of ballpoint ink leads to many of its identifying features, such as the color "ballpoint blue" and the way it can be layered on top of itself to the point of forming a glossy, leather-like surface.

Dawn Clements is another artist who recalls working with the pen at an early age, completing her first ballpoint drawings while in grade school. Later, in her teenage years, she remembers writing simple observational text with ballpoint on the wallpaper next to her bed, including notes on the weather and the time of day. Clements expanded on this use of the pen for its notational character in her large-scale ballpoint drawings depicting interiors, which she began in the mid-1990s. Clements also draws with Sumi ink, but goes back and forth to ballpoint to vary both media and speed. "The Sumi drawings are very fast, while the ballpoint drawings are slower, being both more precise and more intimate," Clements has stated. Many of the ballpoint drawings, such as *Barney's* (*Leon Morin*,

*Priest*) included in this exhibition, have fields of text surrounding their central images, and are records of ambient sound heard by the artist during the drawing process, such as song lyrics and radio interviews. Augmenting the intimacy of the interior spaces portrayed, the text in the ballpoint works bring the images back to everyday, lived experience, and reflects on the pen's primary usage as a writing tool. "Both the images and text in these drawings is furious note taking in real time," says the artist. "The paper is like a big blotter pad—nothing is left out."<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1990s Rita Ackermann became known for her lyrical, yet tough, paintings of young women, many with diaristic overtones. In 1996 Ackermann turned to ballpoint as a medium when she was making a break with her earlier subject matter, using the pen to depict the sensibility, particularly the violence, of the male mind. Ackermann's first drawings with ballpoint were on denim as well as canvas, referencing transgressive adolescent expression such as drawing/writing on jeans as well as graffiti. Ballpoint was also a conceptual choice, selected by the artist for its cheap and ignoble associations, plus the fact that it was perceived as being temporal and provisional. "It lacks a classical background," Ackermann has stated. "It also has the curious quality that it might fade away and disappear."<sup>10</sup> Ackermann's works on canvas featuring ballpoint also use other media, but the blue, scratchy quality of the pen is immediately recognizable even though it is frequently overlaid with passages of acrylic. These works exhibit a nervous tension between the "low" nature of scribbled ballpoint and the high art associations of expressionist paint handling.

**Dawn Clements**, *Barney's (Leon Morin, Priest, 1961)*, 2011  
Ballpoint pen on paper  
Collection of Martin Hale, Jr.  
Courtesy of the artist and Pierogi Gallery, Brooklyn, NY





**Rita Ackermann, *Good, Bad, and Evil*, 1996-97**  
Acrylic and ballpoint pen on linen  
Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

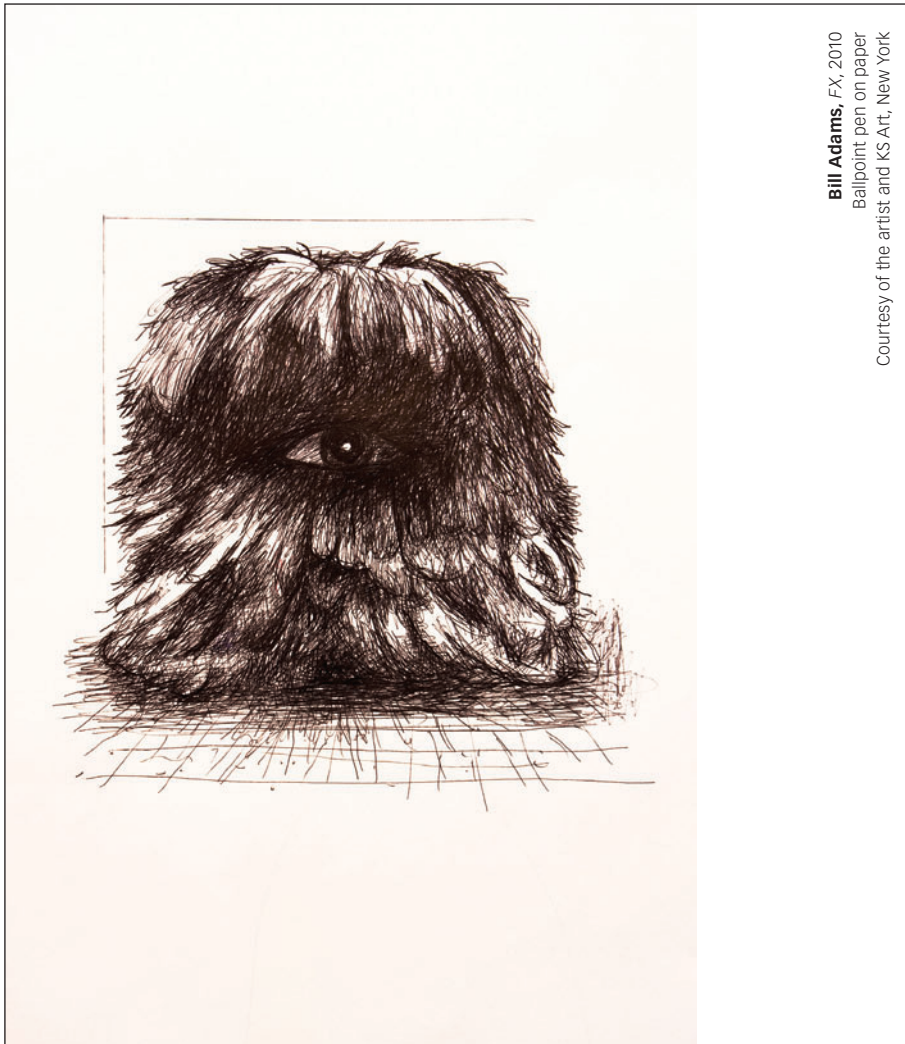
Clearly, many artists bring the ballpoint into their practice as a cultural statement, using the pen as a critical device to probe beneath the surface. Bill Adams first seriously took up drawing with the pen in 1995, immediately connecting with the way that its sensitive yet robust character was a natural conduit for certain emotional experiences. As with many New Yorkers, the trauma of 9/11 heightened Adams's insecurity, and ballpoint was a medium that seemed to match the tenor of the times. "I respond to the portability of the pen," the artist has stated. "If you need to escape, the ballpoint can come with you and you can keep working. It provides a way to stay afloat in a desperate situation." Adams works exclusively with the Fisher AG7 Astronaut Pen, which was designed to operate under extreme conditions, including zero gravity and severe temperatures. Given these facts, it might seem strange that Adams's main motif has become a cat's head, but in this image the artist has found an unusual outlet for his emotional concerns. Years ago, Adams had to give away his pet cat, and the memory of this became (in his words) "a standard for melancholy."<sup>11</sup> He describes the cat's image as being "dumb and humdrum," using adjectives that can also describe general perceptions of the ballpoint itself. Adams's cat drawings skillfully bring medium and subject into an odd and poetic alignment.

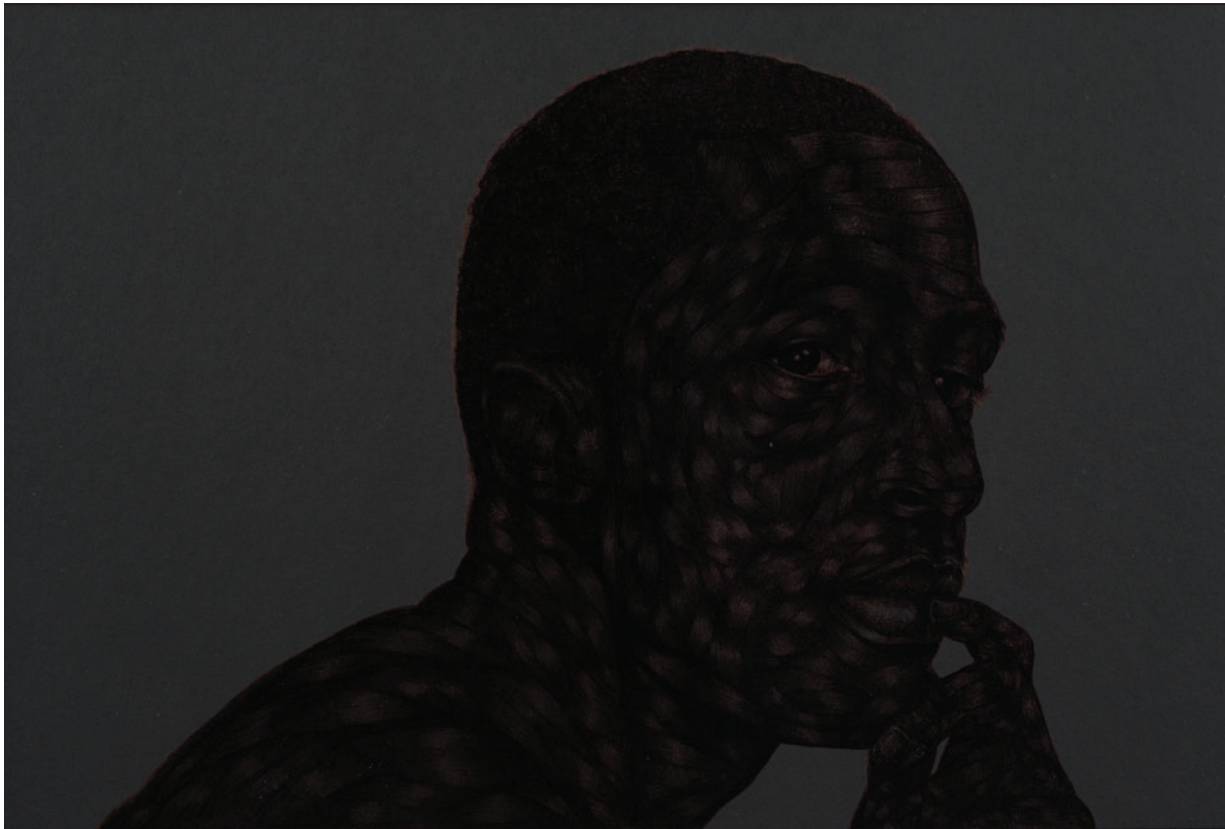
Toyin Odotola capitalizes on the singular character of ballpoint ink in her figurative drawings that focus on portraiture. Odotola, who was born in Nigeria and grew up in California and Alabama, gravitated to the ballpoint as a primary medium in graduate school. As mentioned earlier, ballpoint ink can be layered on top of itself to the point of forming a dense, burnished, and iridescent surface that resembles glossy leather, a quality Odotola

recognized as being capable of transforming paper into a powerful analogy to black skin. The subjects of Odutola's drawing are identity and race, and her approach presents the body as landscape, a place inhabited by the psyche, and references cultural phenomena that accentuate identity, such as scarification and tattooing. The dense network of parallel ballpoint lines presents not an optical rendering of her subjects, but rather a woven and knotty topography that emphasizes the subjective and psychological. "The pen and ink is like a container that reveals but also hides," she has stated. "The more information I give in terms of mark-making or texture, the more a person's state of mind is revealed."<sup>12</sup>

Over the past sixty years, the ballpoint pen has become the preeminent writing tool and has gradually been adopted by a diverse range of artists as a major means of expression. In the present moment, the use of computers and smartphones is once again revolutionizing writing, with keyboards and styluses replacing ballpoint pens for everything from note taking to the signatures on credit card transactions. Yet more ballpoints are being produced and sold than ever before; even while technology is once again shifting the way we communicate with each other, the ballpoint remains a durable and seemingly infinitely adaptable drawing device that can dance on the boundary between the colloquial and the profound. Its tiny, rolling tip is after all a sphere, without front or back, up or down, with only one true direction: forward.

Richard Klein, exhibitions director





**Toyin Odutola**, *Adeola in Abuja (Study)*, 2012  
Acrylic ink, ballpoint pen on black board  
Private collection, New York

- 1 The Bic Cristal is the clear plastic ballpoint with the removable, streamlined cap whose design has remained virtually unchanged since its introduction 1951. The Cristal is in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Statistics are from Bic's corporate website: <http://www.bicworld.com>.
- 2 Alfred Fairbank, *The Story of Handwriting—Origins and Development* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1970), p. 85.
- 3 For a fascinating account of Biro's life, see György Muldova's biography *Ballpoint* (North Adams, MA: New Europe Books, 2012).
- 4 "Biro" is still the generic name used for the ballpoint pen in most of the world.
- 5 In the 1950s, Andy Warhol did observational ballpoint drawings prior to the development of Pop art.
- 6 Many contemporary ballpoints have the ability to draw a continuous line of as much as 28,000 linear feet, which is over five miles. Mary Bellis, "A Brief History of Writing Instruments; Part 3: The Battle of the Ballpoint Pens," About.com (<http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa101697.htm>)
- 7 Manufacturers that make archival ballpoint pens include Ballagraph, Parker, Papermate, Pilot, Schmidt, and Schneider. The International Organization for Standardization has issued a standard for archival (document) ballpoint ink: ISO 12757-2.
- 8 Typical ballpoint ink is 40 percent to 50 percent dye.
- 9 Quoted from a conversation with Dawn Clements, January 18, 2013.
- 10 Quoted from an email from Rita Ackermann, January 23, 2013.
- 11 Quoted from a conversation with Bill Adams, February 7, 2013.
- 12 Quoted in an article on Toyin Odutola by Rebecca Spence, *Artnews*, March 2012, p. 128.

# The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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**Alighiero Boetti, *Oronimo* (detail), 1973**  
Ballpoint pen on card; eleven parts  
Collection of Gian Enzo Sperone, New York  
Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York



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