

Gathering Force: Line, Edge, and Colour in the Drawings of Anne Truitt

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Anne Truitt's first discovery of her exceptional drawing abilities came when, as a school girl, she drew an amoeba in biology class and found – to her delight and amazement – that she excelled at the task. Throughout Truitt's many notebooks, she repeatedly describes similar sensations of surprise and curiosity which, decade after decade, drove her art-making:

'[In] 1961... my work suddenly became clear before me.'

'I remember how startled I was when, early in 1962, I realized I was becoming obsessed with colour.'

Truitt's writings – begun in the 1970s, when she was in her fifties — describe an artist as if perpetually astonished by the powerful artistic impulses that always compelled her, never letting go. A selection of her sparse, straightforward drawings, 1962-1999, bears witness to this intensely committed and uninterrupted lifetime of art.

Anne Truitt (b. 1921, Maryland; d. 2004) has been well-known since the early 1960s for her column-like sculptures formed by painted blocks of solid colour. Yet her drawings perhaps best display Truitt's unending artistic drive, and her lifelong fascination with abstract art's essential elements: line, edge, and colour. The '*magic of drawing*', she wrote, was that each mark on the page literally traced the exact point where her body touched the surface: where the forms and colours that she held in her mind's eye spread through her, and were released on paper.

'Where my pencil touches the paper, is the place at which the body holds itself intact.'

'The line marks, with infinite tenderness, the experience of a body.'

Her drawings bring us closest to Truitt's immediate interaction with art-making, and display – perhaps better than her sculptures — the full breadth of this artist's visual imagination.

Despite their pared-down vocabulary, Anne Truitt's drawings vary immensely: some are composed only of lines; others only of pigment. Some look sculptural: *7 Nov '62* presents an asymmetrical black/grey polygon with squared-off corners resting heavily, like a solid. Some almost seem studies — although no Truitt drawing literally points towards a larger work, and each drawing constitutes a finished piece in its own right. Some are semi-architectural or blueprint-like: in multiple works titled *9 Jan '63*, beautifully executed straight lines form a sort of elementary sculpture or horizontal window, maybe a Modernist sarcophagus. Other drawings are brushy and painterly: the positively Rothko-esque reds of *21 June '70*; or the wall-like expanse of thick pigment in *Truitt '91*, richly textured in multi-layered shades of

violet. The selection of works on paper collected here attests to Truitt's unending curiosity for abstraction's essential building blocks — line, edge, and colour — and how she found endless meaning in testing and renewing these basic components of her art.

'*Make a stroke as if [you] only had a tenth of a second to live*', Truitt used to urge her students at the University of Maryland; and she was just as demanding of her own marks on paper. The artist rejected and destroyed much of her own work; in fact, no drawing prior to 1959 survives. (In 1948 Truitt chose to pursue art as her profession, after an initial interest in writing and poetry.) The artist drew prolifically, indulging in what might be described as day-long drawing binges — for this reason certain dates are repeated: 9 January 1963; 19 October 1967. She worked intensely, preserving little.

'Sheet after sheet of Arches paper spread around the studio, covering all of my tables and finally the floor.'

'I made many, many [drawings] ... I'd throw them on the floor and at the end day gather them all up. Sometimes I threw them all away...'

'Only occasionally', she writes, when 'straightening up to look' at the paper before her, she was surprised to discover '*one of my drawings. But it is only one*'. In effect, each of Truitt's drawing represents a rare, successful episode in both her concentrated efforts and her demanding self-expectations.

I.

Rarely did Anne Truitt's path through art-making, or art-world politics, follow an easy route. On one hand, Truitt was hailed as nothing less than the first-ever Minimalist — a recognition claimed for her by the towering American art critic of her day, Clement Greenberg. On the other hand, certain 1960s figureheads (including Michael Fried and Donald Judd) admired Truitt, but expressed reserve. Judd, in particular, always seemed mildly suspicious of this alleged fellow Minimalist, whose handmade and colour-obsessed artworks refused his hard-line industrial approach — as if the definition of 'true' Minimalism belonged, somehow, solely to him. In 1968 Greenberg wrote on Truitt for *Vogue* — rather than his usual art magazines — wondering aloud how this "*housewife, with three small children, working in Washington... [could] fit the role of pioneer of far-out art*". Yes Clem; what was this well brought-up married lady, living far from the artistic hotbed of New York, doing producing rigorous abstract art, so severe and unfamiliar as to be deemed '*far-out*'? Even supportive critics back then felt perfectly entitled to depict women artists this way: as social curiosities, wallflowers crashing the all-boy art party.

There is nothing particularly 'female' about Truitt's work, but her adult life coincided with the feminist awakening of the 1960s-70s, and she endured the trying circumstances particular to a mid-20th-century American woman. Truitt was a devoted mother, and all homemaking responsibilities of cleaning, cooking, caring, and entertaining fell squarely on her shoulders. Studio time was severely limited and intensely precious. In 1961 when her young children were aged five, three, and one she produced her first full-scale exhibition — a veritable miracle of self-belief and stamina — and yet that show was met with Judd's nagging doubts, as expressed in *Arts Magazine*, over whether Truitt's work was sufficiently 'serious'. The hurdles commonly encountered by Truitt's generation even in later life — finding herself

unexpectedly in post-divorce middle age at the helm of a single-parent home; turning to university teaching to support her family; discovering that her male colleagues were (for no good reason) better paid than she was — lends a special, astonishing resonance to the profound commitment she maintained, despite innumerable obstacles, to her artwork.

Today Anne Truitt is recognized as a uniquely valuable voice in late 20th-century abstraction, an artist who — for James Meyer, prominent Truitt specialist and Minimalism scholar — provided a crucial reference point in discussions around what Minimalism was, was not, might be. Her unadorned sculptures from the early 1960s positioned her instantly alongside Robert Morris, Anthony Caro, and her Minimalist peers. Truitt featured in era-defining exhibitions — ‘Primary Structures’ (1966); ‘American Sculpture of the Sixties’ (1967) — and she was discussed in Fried’s monumental ‘Art and Objecthood’ essay of 1967. Yet Truitt remained somewhat isolated: a sublime colourist yet associated with ‘Black White and Grey’ (another notable mid-60s exhibition which included her); and a woman in a resolutely male art world.

Although well-informed of the art of her times, in her writings Truitt seems principally devoted to her own artistic instincts; this quiet introspection and sensitivity becomes especially evident in her small-scaled, focused drawings. As Truitt professed over and over, she aspired to none of Minimalism’s objectivity: hers’ was a wholly subjective art.

‘Minimal art is characterized by non-referentiality ... [my work] is totally referential.’

‘... [my works] look so objective. Yet each one sprang from the very core of my subjectivity.’

‘I’ve struggled all my life to get maximum meaning out of the simplest possible form.’

Unlike the work of Judd or Flavin, Truitt’s sculptures were anything but machine made, resulting instead from painstaking layer after layer of painting and polishing. Similarly, her seemingly ‘monochromatic’ works on paper — the bright blues of *Truitt ’67*; the bands of green in *Untitled* (1967) — are produced with much patience in dip after dip into carefully varied shades of pigment. Above all, Truitt was fascinated by how colour could ‘gather force within [her] somewhere’, and the limitless ‘possibilities of line’.

In sum, the myriad possibilities of colour and line provided both the method and the subject-matter behind Anne Truitt’s exquisite drawings. Resulting combinations might be dark and dense: the earthy *Remember No. 2* (1999) suggests a thick cross-section of mossy ground, with a blacker bottom layer weighing down heavily its long straight lower edge. In contrast, a colour/line combination could turn luminous and ephemeral: the sliver of blues atop *Summer ’96 No. 3* hovers like a faraway horizon — like the distant farmhouse perched on the hilltop horizon of that classic regional American painting, Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World* (1948). James Meyer has persuasively connected Truitt’s art-making with her provincial American childhood; in particular, Meyer associates the pin-straight streets of her gridded Maryland hometown with Truitt’s desire to pull great, long, horizon-like lines across sheets of paper — even across the landscape itself. In 1950, a young Truitt

drove clear across Texas and felt as if she were ‘drawing’ by car a great long line (*‘the road was absolutely straight in front of me...’*). One is reminded here not so much of Minimal art as Land art, and Walter De Maria’s desert *Mile Long Drawing* (1968), or the Pop artists’ romance with ribbon-like US highways.

In the 1960s, paint and colour seemed to belong to Pop, certainly not to Minimalism. For this reason another colourist and painter, Robert Mangold, was affiliated with and yet distinct from Minimalism’s core sculptors. Mangold’s monochromes such as *Neutral Pink Area* (1966) were inspired by the immense, irregular cut-outs of sky framed between Manhattan’s gleaming skyscrapers. In Truitt’s drawings such as *28 Dec ’62*, we seem perhaps to see an expanse of night sky — interrupted, however, by a small vertical notch: perhaps a modest chimney, suggestive of Truitt’s considerably less urban, more housebound skyscape.

II.

‘It is curious to me that people take straight lines for granted. We never see them unless we make them ourselves’, she wrote. In her barest drawings, Truitt seems to interrogate just how fragile, how brief and how thin, a line can be and still ‘hold’ its own — for example the white-on-white ghost of a line forming *Summer 96 No. 29*. Truitt’s faintly ‘living line’ can sometimes race across the paper in syncopated, interrupted dashes like a heartbeat, as in her *Sable* series from 1979: a line hiccupping across the paper, disappearing and reappearing as if drawn in the sand. Even in these reduced drawings, the assured direction of Truitt’s line — the same confident quality that first surprised the artist many decades before, while still at school — never faltered.

In some drawings, Truitt leaves lines worryingly suspended and untethered to earth, as in *15 Jan ’71* where perpendicular lines seem adrift, abandoned in space. In fact, lines are rarely let loose in the history of art; usually a drawn line is asked to become ‘something else’ — whether the outline of a figure, a landscape, or a closed abstract form, such as Agnes Martin’s multitude of lines composing a tidy grid in *Morning* (1965). Truitt often wrote of ‘holding a line’: of producing a line able to maintain an autonomous existence, unanchored to ‘something else’. Such ‘held’ lines might be tall straight verticals as with her noted sculptures, or the almost architectural form in *14 July ’73 no. 1*, which appears grounded by a strong straight foundation but is left unfinished at the top, as if disappearing into heavy cloud. Truitt’s can lines thicken into independent slabs (*10 December ’73*); or join tentatively together, forming abrupt corners or an incipient maze (*10 March ’74*).

Lines shift from thin, singular entities to become powerful demarcations of colour, or edges. *‘Edges seem to me to promise insight, particularly edges where what we think of as opposites meet,’* she writes. Edges are the boundaries for Truitt’s unique palette: the grey verging on chalky white yet hinting of sky blue; the wash of reddish brown with faint green undertone, like an autumn leaf. Elsewhere an edge might be tilted and bisect the page, creating great fields of black and white (*7 July ’74*). Or, Truitt’s edges might bend into a bold searchlight form, such as the canyon-like lilac chasm of *6 Sept ’87 No. 3*; or the almost Constructivist sunflower-yellow geometries of *Truitt ’91*. A line might swerve into a bowl shape (two titled *19 Oct ’67*), or be angled to describe indefinable closed shapes that appear almost sculptural — if impossibly ‘balanced’ on the weakest of horizontal bases — in balloon-like monochromatic works from the late 1980s.

Lines turn irregular and painterly, formed at the overlap between two shades of pink (*22 July ’71*), purple (*24 July ’71*), or olive green (*23 Oct ’71*); these

improbable painted joints are somehow *lighter* in colour than the two deeper shades that overlap here. These brightly coloured works can suggest Barnett Newman's 'zips', which Truitt admired intensely; for critic Brenda Richardson, however, Truitt's painted lines suggest not a zip but a 'fall' of colour. Although these 'falls' can resemble the long thin shape of a brushstroke, her painterly lines are more dipped — or poured, even smudged — than brushed. Like the elaborate painting and polishing required for her sculptures, the dipping process behind these drawings was a complicated, multi-sequenced affair. The artist would lay paper in a tray of carefully mixed pigment, allowing the sheet to absorb a thin layer of watery paint, and then repeat this process up to fifteen times. Truitt would experiment with many sheets and colour tones at once, saturating and nuancing shades, waiting for wet paper to dry on clotheslines hung all over the studio. For Truitt a 'drawing' was produced with graphite or ink on paper; any artwork produced with paint — whether on canvas or good-quality paper — she uniformly deemed a 'painting'.

Colour for this artist is everything, Richardson has claimed, and one of Truitt's stated ambitions was to liberate colour from any armature, to '*set it free*'. As with her columnar sculptures, Truitt experimented on paper with unexplored ways to broker colour and structure, well beyond the conventional paint-on-rectangular-canvas, to catch colour '*on the wing*' — a favourite expression of hers. In *Summer 1996 No. 2*, she seems to squeeze out a bare dose of colour at the exact point where a curved and a horizontal line meet at their tangent, forming a green-blue ray like the one said magically to appear at the sunset's very last glimmer on the planet's horizon.

These five decades of works on paper attest to the personal and material resources that this artist gathered together — at any cost and across the whole of her lifetime — in pursuit of her distinctive, uncompromising art. They form a testament to Truitt's unshakeable resilience, and her pioneering combination of abstract art and self-discovery. '*I had hustled my pain, my despair, my delight, my bafflement onto paper*', she wrote; in so doing Truitt invented a language or — as some have noted, an entire literature — of abstraction inextricably linked to life, time, space, and selfhood.