

DIANA COOPER SYSTEMS THAT MAKE NO SENSE

by Marion Daniel

The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

T. S. Eliot, "Preludes"

Diana Cooper's drawings and installations connect an abstract vocabulary with something altogether different. Images of nature and technology, cells, heartbeats, and geometric screens form an ensemble of lines, breaks, and repetitions in the same motif. Her dead-end systems, unplugged electric circuits and seismographs fascinate. At the end of the nineties she traded brush and painting for magic markers and other tools. She worked on a larger scale and then began a new kind of drawing that's hard to take in all at once, that surrounds viewers, making them want to get inside the formal rhythm. Though she belongs to an abstract tradition close to the vibrant painting of the late Mondrian (think *Brooklyn Boogie Woogie*) Cooper's work remains hard to place: she connects things that seem irreconcilable. Her abstraction, which draws from reality, is a repertoire of forms, rhythms, and sensations.

Studying Diana Cooper's work leads you to a more capacious definition of drawing. Her 2007 show at MOCA Cleveland was called *Beyond the Line*, a title that also suggests a crossing of limits. She is developing a certain approach to line, networks, and ruptures that begins in doodling and then creates a perfectly controlled structure. By bringing these elements together she creates a distinctive language somewhere between sensation and intellectual construction, including, as she puts it, "everything that has nothing to do with verbal language."

Drawn systems

Diana Cooper's attractive works seem governed by a complex internal logic that we've lost the manual for. The term system comes immediately to mind. She is fascinated by mental and numeric systems that she then shifts, distorts, and transforms – visually strong systems that are organic (note the proliferation of little round shapes suggesting cells) and geometric at the same time.

Holding these systems together is an automatic, and labor intensive, drawing that multiplies proliferating forms. Blowing up her doodles to the size of abstract paintings, as in *The Black One* (1997), a large format monochrome felt-tip drawing, Cooper is interested in the energy they give off. Through a kind of accumulation, empty and filled spaces join to evoke an explosion of cells and clear linear structures. In the middle of her doodles Cooper creates what seem to be imaginary organisms about to implode.

Doodling on a large scale produces an intricate web of forms, to which she then adds odd things like pompoms, pipe cleaners, or adhesive aluminum ribbon. In *Experiments in 3D* (2000) there is a three-dimensional hybridization. The work somehow combines automatic and more “technical drawing,” and brings to mind overlapping mineral and cellular elements, squares, and cylinders. Certain pieces also remind one of Sol Lewitt’s *Wall Drawings*, which define equations allowing one to trace on the wall visual systems pushed to their extreme, foreseeing all possible combinations. Cooper, on the other hand, perverts the systematicity of her drawings through random elements. Other pieces, like her *All Our Wandering* (2007), which has the geometric form of a ziggurat, remind one of the *Specific Objects* of Donald Judd. This work’s exterior reflects a minimal aesthetic, while the interior system of red lines evokes the blood system. A numerical system is associated with a handmade one: beginning with a printed image, Cooper adds elements from painting and drawing, placing the work somewhere between these opposed aesthetics.

Between automatic and structured drawing

Through repetition, Cooper’s drawings sometimes look like those of the insane and psychotic, thanks to the unconscious state she tries to attain when doodling. In following the logic of automatic drawing, her systems seem constructed through the association of related forms containing a chain of sounds and meanings, just as they do for the insane. But when one pays attention to the way these elements are brought together, line seems to play the dominant role. Blurred in places, the lines often retain their structure through external elements added to the drawing, like plastic wire or aluminum strips, in a manner that, for the artist, evokes choreography. In her installations, Diana Cooper says, she wants to “choreograph a space” – that is, organize movement from one element to another. (She was once a dancer.) She creates structures and continuities between them, while still seeking what seems out of control – what in dance would be wild movement.

In her more recent installations, line drawing is replaced by photographs, usually reworked on a computer. In fact, when she does her installations and drawings she is always collecting a large number of images, seeking out geometric forms and symmetries. The juxtaposition of these photos creates new combinations somewhere between ultra-sophisticated multimedia mechanisms and archaic biological forms. In the installation *Fly Bye* (2010), Cooper juxtaposes plastic tubes and photos of a red cage whose perpendicular pieces seem to multiply infinitely through a kind of mirror effect. Lines zip through the installation, sometimes taking graphic form, sometimes resembling wires or tape. Thanks to the linear traces repeating endlessly into the piece, photographic and other elements are connected.

Cooper follows her logic in this medium or that, a logic that shapes and grows, uniting perfect composition and pure wildness, producing something with magnetic power, bordering on the absurd.

A realistic abstraction

When talking about her work Diana Cooper refers to an abstraction that includes realistic images, from the miniscule to the gigantic, in which the viewer will feel submerged.

This work is still abstract, in the sense that it still abstracts, imports, and transforms reality through the energy emanating from all her works. “I think abstractly,” she says. “That doesn’t mean, though, that things shouldn’t be recognizable.” Here she connects with an important trend in abstraction today, which has moved way from pure formalism to find a connection with reality: by insisting on the reality of artworks as objects of perception, but without radically excluding images of reality. In *Taughannock* (2006) she introduces the recognizable figure of a butterfly, which shows up several times. Fascinated by a mobile representing a butterfly in her room when she was a resident at Cornell University, she photographed its shadow and then drew it. She then realized that Vladimir Nabokov, who was also a butterfly expert, had lived at Cornell University as well. This story places her work into a narrative that, though more anecdotal than foundational, adds a richness of meaning.

Cooper also says that industrial design along with images you see on airport tarmacs are sources of inspiration. Finding myself one day in an airport after missing a plane, I noted the lines traced by the planes, the buses, the bridges, and the strange vehicles of unknown purpose. It was like a science fiction film where all kinds of things happen that you don’t quite understand. Diana Cooper’s work leaves a similar impression, placed as it is somewhere between perfect construction and the incomprehensible, where lines lead we know not where.

In certain ways her aesthetics of hybridity places her close to the work of Lee Bontecou, whom she admires. Bontecou is especially interested in the aesthetics of planes and propellers: “I’ve gotten into the habit of sitting near the wing so I can see the turning propeller and the engine. I also see the riveted surface of the wing and I feel this incredible power. My imagination literally flies.” Bontecou constructs three-dimensional wall sculptures out of diverse materials – metal frames, cloth, polyester structures – that in their heterogeneity and humor bring to mind Cooper’s installations. In one of her last installations, *Seismograph* (2010), she uses different sized lipstick tubes to which she attaches little mirrors too small to see yourself in, which produce instead a complexification and diffraction of space. You can also see in her studio a fur covered electrical outlet, an *homage* to Meret Oppenheim’s *Fur Covered Teacup* (1936) de Meret Oppenheim.

With Diana Cooper's drawings and installations it makes more sense to speak of the construction of a visual language, rather than of abstraction. For her, language is not only oral, it is always present around us. She finds it in all the structures she mixes together: a ziggurat structure with an interior suggesting the blood system, a butterfly, and an abstract drawn form. The real is perceived as a source of different open possibilities but also as a repertoire of forms. The experience of perception takes the form of associations and telescoping of different systems that, due to the line's trace, are organized into systems having a clear syntax defined by its rhythm and the connections it makes between different elements. The strangeness, impact, and sensuality of this work comes no doubt from connections and associations like these.