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Making Cutting-Edge Art with Ballpoint Pens

BY Trent Morse POSTED 01/08/14

Accessible and affordable, the ballpoint pen has become the medium of choice for artists to make obsessive abstractions, extreme drawings, and playful riffs on venerated ink traditions

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Last August, [Tovin Odotola](#) brought a stack of ballpoint pens and markers into the [Asian Art Museum](#) in San Francisco, sat down, and drew a picture. A large screen projected her progress as she filled the paper with thousands of marks. Museumgoers circled around her and asked her questions. “One lady was like, ‘Is that pen? I don’t believe it!’” Odotola recalls. “I was drawing, and she took the pen out of my hand and looked at it.”

To shut out these kinds of distractions and focus on the task at hand, Odotola put on headphones and listened to dance music. Four hours after she started drawing, she was done, having produced a densely limned portrait of an Asian woman with golden hair and eyebrows, her skin composed of Odotola’s signature sinewy ballpoint lines, with blue, green, and flesh tones rising from underneath. “It was shocking that I finished, because I’d never really *performed* drawing,” says Odotola, who was born in Nigeria and grew up in the Bay Area and Alabama. “It’s normally a very solitary act within my studio.”

Fortunately for Odotola, she has been in plenty of other exhibitions over the last year that haven’t required her to perform for a crowd. She had a [solo show](#) at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, where she’s now based, and her ballpoint drawings have made appearances at the [Studio Museum](#) in Harlem, the [Menil Collection](#) in Houston, and the [Chinese Cultural Center of San Francisco](#) and are now at the [Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts](#) in Brooklyn (through January 19).

She was also included in “[Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950](#)” at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which placed the 28-year-old Odotola at the tail end of a succession of creators who have embraced the lowly ballpoint pen as a serious tool for making art. The others in the show were [Alberto Giacometti](#), [Aldighiero Boetti](#), [Il Lee](#), [Jan Fabre](#), [Martin Kippenberger](#), [Bill Adams](#), [Joanne Greenbaum](#), [Russell Crotty](#), [Rita Ackermann](#), and [Dawn Clements](#). But curator Richard Klein traces the genesis of ballpoint art back to Argentina in the 1940s.

The ballpoint pen was first patented in 1888 as a device for jotting on leather. It wasn’t developed as a writing tool until 50 years later, when the Hungarian journalist [László Bíró](#) had the idea of putting fast-drying newspaper ink into a pen with a tiny ball at the tip that would allow the ink to flow evenly. Then came World War II, and Bíró escaped to Argentina in 1941, taking his invention with him. Manufacture of the pens began in Buenos Aires soon afterward.

[Lucio Fontana](#) also moved to Argentina in the early ’40s. He was born in that country in 1899 but spent a large part of his life in Italy, where he had come under the influence of the Futurists and shared their obsession with cutting-edge technology. “Fontana was the first artist to use ballpoint pen, in 1946,” Klein says. “The pen was heavily promoted in Argentina, and I’m sure it’s no coincidence that he was using ballpoint pen in the same place where Bíró had invented it.” Those early ballpoint sketches reflect Fontana’s interest in merging art, science, and technology through his Spatialist movement. In one drawing, Fontana doodled a spiraling funnel filled with swirling orbs, as if he were testing the continuous-flow quality of the new pen.



Russell Crotty, *Watch the Dolphins Play*, 2007, ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper on a fiberglass sphere.

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Soon, the ballpoint spread to Europe and the United States, thanks in large part to the clear-plastic [Bic Cristal](#). It was cheap, portable, and reliable, and it didn’t smudge

or blot as much as fountain pens did. It also produced uniform lines, making it a quintessentially modernist tool. Throughout the '50s and '60s, Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, Agnes Martin, Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, Yayoi Kusama, John Cage, Sigmar Polke, Louise Bourgeois, and many other artists sketched with ballpoint pen. Cy Twombly incorporated it into his doodle-and-text works, and "the Fluxus artists used all sorts of office materials, including ballpoint pens, tape, stamps, and typewriters," says Scott Gerson, associate conservator at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Perhaps the first person to use the ballpoint as the primary medium in a major work of art was Alighiero Boetti. Starting in the early '70s, the Italian artist employed dozens of helpers to fill sheets of paper with solid fields of black, blue, or red ink. His [1973 piece](#) in the Aldrich show consisted of eleven such panels, all with "ONONIMO"—a wordplay on the Italian terms for anonymous, homonymous, and eponymous—etched from white negative space at the top. "The blue in this work is really extraordinary," says Klein. "The pieces are really well preserved. Other Boettis were not—they are faded."

Which brings up the biggest problem with ballpoint ink: preservation. "Early ballpoint-pen ink, especially the blue, would fade if you exposed it to the light. It's not permanent," Klein says. "That's because most of the inks are dye-based colorants, which are susceptible to color-shift or fading," says Gerson. Today, many professional artists buy pens containing archival inks, but "really, the only reliable thing is to keep it out of the light," Gerson adds.



Joo Lee Kang, *Family Portrait #6*, 2013, ballpoint pen on paper.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY NAGA, BOSTON

In the decades since Boetti's collaborations, the ballpoint has become increasingly absorbed into the art world, and like all artists today, ballpointists aren't hindered by style or scale. Jan Fabre spent a decade working with the pens, which culminated in his covering [an entire Belgian castle](#) in blue ballpoint marks in 1990. Russell Crotty makes large grids of small scenes of the shifting California landscape, the ocean, and astronomical phenomena, and he also draws these things onto globes. In Boston, [Joo Lee Kang](#) portrays animals and plants in the style of Victorian naturalists and sometimes converts her drawings into wallpaper or crumpled-paper sculptures. [Renato Orara](#), who recently showed at Josée Bienvenu Gallery in New York, smoothly renders any object that catches his eye: a wire brush, a wristwatch, a broken umbrella, a leather jacket. "I don't try to make things look real," he says. "An art writer once pointed out that I use realism, but only as a strategy for smuggling something else."

In Asia, some artists use ballpoint to riff on venerated ink traditions. One such piece appears in the show "[Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China](#)," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (through April 6). That work is [Liu Wei's](#) 24-leaf accordion album *Untitled No. 6 "Flower"* (2003), which contains painted and drawn Chinese landscapes and giant peonies next to "naked figures with exaggerated genitalia," says Maxwell K. Hearn, the Met's chief curator of Asian art. These mixed-media scenes are embellished with "scratchy lines that are ballpoint pen," Hearn adds. "They're scribbles. You could miss them."

You couldn't miss the scribbles in the work of Il Lee, who, since 1981, has been filling canvas and paper with abstract, woolly lines that progress from wispy to murky. The Korean-born, New York-

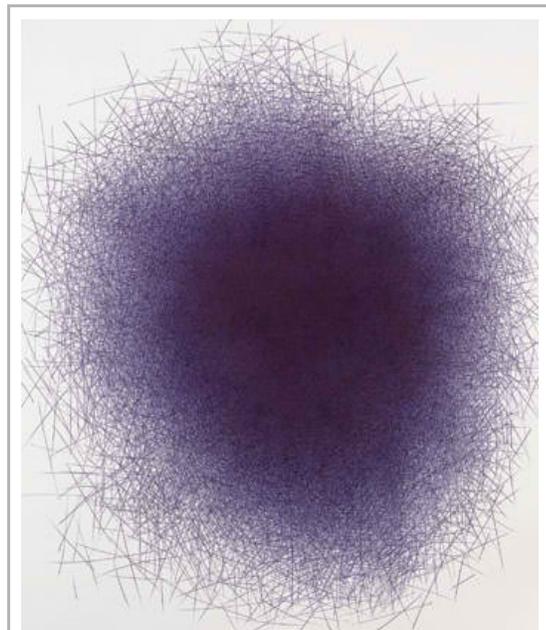
based Lee, who's represented by [Art Projects International](#) in New York, is a ballpoint purist, meaning he goes through a lot of ink. "I usually use anywhere from 100 to 120 or more ballpoint pens on large canvas works," he says. For his [2007 solo show](#) at the [Queens Museum of Art](#), he emptied 600 blue ballpoint pens to make a 50-foot-long drawing that snaked along the wall.

Like Lee, Italian artist [Angiola Gatti](#), who had her U.S. debut at New York's Ryan Lee gallery last fall, scrawls with ballpoint to form abstract masses and voids. Gatti says she works on a "corporeal, one-to-one" scale, drawing on vertical canvases that are roughly the size of her body. She likes how intimately close to the artwork ballpoint brings her, and sometimes she presses the pen so hard that the "canvas is nearly carved."

[Marlene McCarty](#), who shows at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York, also draws on large surfaces, but her work is highly figurative and psychologically charged, populated by sexualized adolescent girls and great apes. To her, the blue ballpoint pen reflects what high-school girls use for homework and for "doodling on their notebooks," and it's the preferred tool for "primate fieldwork." However, McCarty is not as romantic as Gatti when it comes to the physicality of ballpoint. "For the scale of my drawings, it's a horrible, tedious, painful medium," she says. "Ballpoint is unforgiving. It can't be corrected. I draw on the wall. Unless the pen is held at just the right angle, it stops working. The pressure required to keep the ink flowing causes shoulder injuries."

"Ballpoint-pen drawing can be extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming because the mark it makes is linear," says Dawn Clements, who shows at [Pierogi](#) in Brooklyn. "I make tonal drawings, so my drawings often take a very long time." Clements describes her patched-together panoramas of the inside of her home and movie sets as life-size "sketchbooks." As with McCarty, the medium mirrors the content in Clements's works, which can run more than 40 feet long. Ballpoint is, she says, "a common domestic implement used to express my experience of domestic life and melodramatic movies that depicted domestic familial situations."

The domesticity of the pen helps explain its mass appeal as an art material. "All of us touch a ballpoint pen practically every day," Klein says. There are now photorealist draftsmen from outside the art world whose pictures have gone viral on the Internet, such as [Samuel Silva](#), a Portuguese lawyer living in London. Though, inexplicably,



Il Lee's *BL-1201*, 2012, ballpoint pen on paper.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ART PROJECTS INTERNATIONAL, NEW YORK

the curator adds, the Aldrich exhibition might be the first museum roundup of ballpoint art, and that show featured only eleven artists in a 1,400-square-foot gallery.

As for which brand of pen is best, it depends on who you ask. “Joanne Greenbaum uses Schmidts that are made in Germany,” Klein says. Crotty likes the Swedish Ballograf. Odotola and Clements both use Paper Mates. Lee says he formerly favored Paper Mate but noticed changes in the “chemistry of the ink.” Lately, he’s been on a Bic kick.

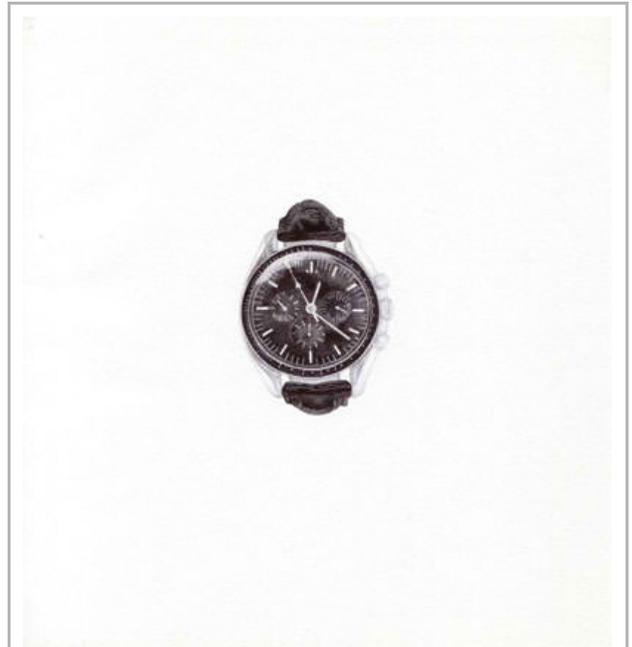
Gatti goes for Bic, Staedtler, and Pilot, while Orara imports his Pilots from Japan. McCarty prefers the blue Montblanc that is designed for “signing important documents.” However, she adds, “they are too heavy to hold upright against the wall for hours at a time, so I take a Montblanc ballpoint refill, force it into a cheap lightweight plastic Bic pen handle, tape the whole thing together, and use that.”

[Peter Saul](#), who has been drawing and painting his funky, freaky, cartoony characters for over half a century and now shows his work at Mary Boone Gallery in New York, says, “I only use black, and I never pay attention to the brand.” And [Yoshitomo Nara](#) claims that when it comes to drawing his Kute Kulture figures, “I’m fine with the kind of pen you find on your hotel desk.”

Trent Morse is senior editor of ARTnews.

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Renato Orara, *Untitled 2011-05*, 2011, ballpoint pen on paper.
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