

Drawing After Betts: Abstraction

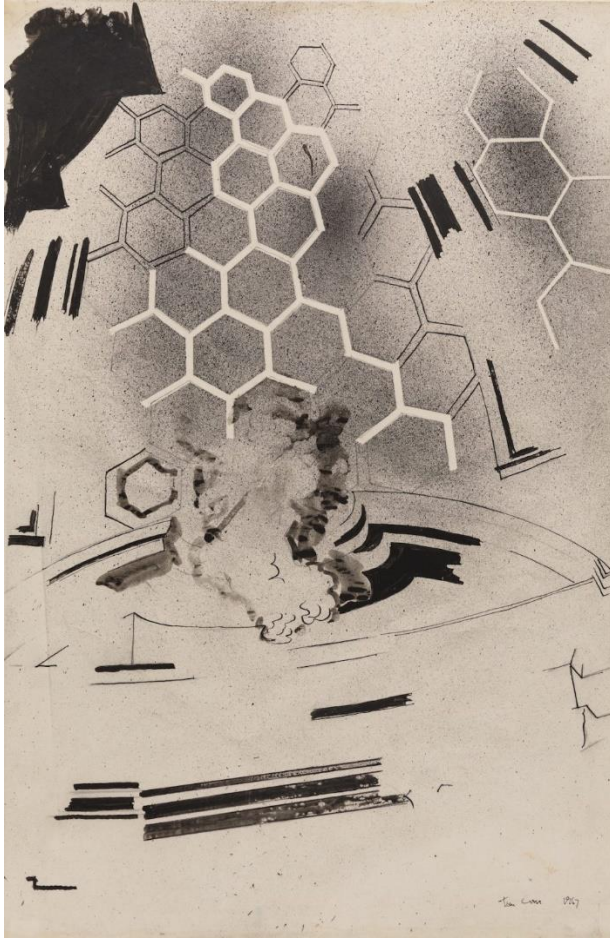
Claude Rogers (1907 – 1979) took over the running of Reading School of Art from Betts in 1963. He summarised the school in which he arrived: “The teaching is limited (only last year has any abstract painting been done) – Sickerty. The syllabus and examination requirements are odd, besides being old-fashioned.” Abstract art (which does not attempt to represent visual reality) had been a growing influence in British art education for some time. Elsewhere students were already encouraged to experiment freely with line, form and colour. Rogers hired new tutors to introduce different ideas about drawing to the curriculum. New courses, like that overseen by Rita Donagh (b.1939), moved students away from drawing the figure.



Rita Donagh, *Life Size (Transitional Drawing for 'Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970')*, pencil and watercolour, 1971. Arts Council Collection: AC 1385. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Rita Donagh. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2021.

Donagh and her students were allocated a room and a model. Rather than life-drawing, the group devised a performance responding to the student protests of 1968. They painted everything white and drew a grid structure over the room. Crosses regulated movement within the space. The following year, Donagh took time off teaching to work on [Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970](#) (1971). This drawing is a preparatory study for the central figure.

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Tom Cross, *San Andreas*, ink on board, 1967. Reading Museum: 2001.250.1. © Estate of Tom Cross.

Cross explored the relationship between abstraction and realism throughout his career. He was appointed Lecturer in Fine Art at Reading by his former Slade tutor Claude Rogers in 1963. *San Andreas* shows his experimentation with compositional structure and form. Having first trained as an architect, Cross had a passion for structure, architectural spaces and grids. In the early 1970s, he became involved with the 'Systems' collective led by the constructivist artist Malcolm Hughes (1920-1997).

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Martin Froy, *At the Table*, ink and collage, 1982. Reading Museum: 1986.133.1. © Estate of Martin Froy

Froy sought to combine contemporary developments with traditional life room practice and lessons from art history - drawing inspiration from "real things". The interlocking shapes in *At the Table* may reference the long wooden table at his home in Reading (where he joined the University in 1972). His obituary in *The Times* recalls how he loved preparing for family gatherings and polishing glasses, even saying

that in a different life he would have liked to have been a butler.

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