A Tense Balance: Drawing Out Deborah Remington

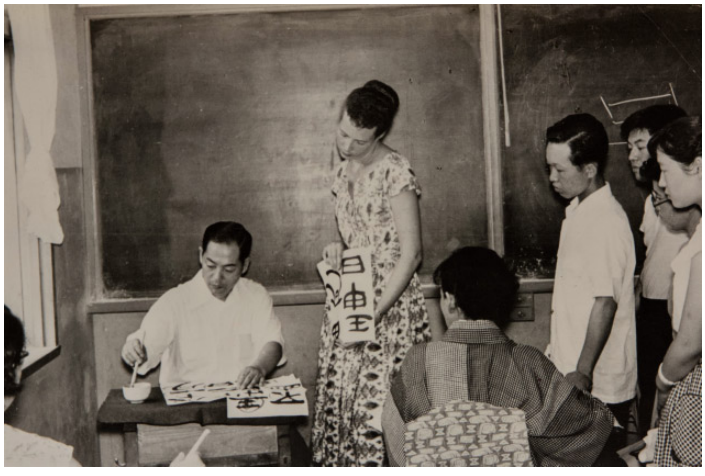
By Gilles Heno-Coe

I am concerned with expressing an intense and personal vision through an imagery which is particularly my own. While I do not completely understand the sources of this imagery, my work contains elements, which by simultaneously attracting and repelling one another, create a tense balance which has emotional and spiritual meaning for me.

—Deborah Remington, 1965[1]

Before she offered this reflection on her art, after studying with luminaries of West Coast abstraction including Clyfford Still and Hassel Smith at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), Deborah Remington had spent nearly three years traveling in Japan and Southeast Asia during the late 1950s, studying the traditional crafts of calligraphy and ikebana while in Japan. This experience, especially her study of traditional and contemporary calligraphy, left a lasting impression on her work. She learned the importance of black and white, as well as how to properly isolate a central image, an approach that at the time ran against the aesthetic principles governing Western painting, particularly abstraction.[2] (fig. 1, front cover). She noted that with Japanese characters it was helpful to look at "each one as one tiny little picture," a crucial insight that allowed her to conceive of the possibility of an isolated image.[3]

Remington's drawing practice developed, between the early 1960s and early 1980s, in a seemingly dialectical process, with one form generating the next—evolving, mutating, spawning legions of closely related but subtly different variations on a theme. For Remington's first major survey exhibition, in 1984 at the Newport Harbor Art Museum (now the Orange County Museum of Art), critic Dore Ashton perceptively wrote that "Given her strong will and unwavering commitment, it is not surprising that Remington's work reflects a true evolution—a manifestation of related events or ideas in an orderly succession … There is a wholesome continuity in her preoccupations."[4]



Deborah Remington taught calligraphy to Japanese and American students at the San Francisco Art Institute, soon after her return to the U.S. from Japan. Photo dated Fall 1958.

By the mid-1960s, Deborah Remington had begun to affirm her developing ambitions and intentions in her drawings, synthesizing from various sources a singular visual language, one characterized by iconic shield-like shapes that float in an indefinite space, paradoxically deep and yet insistently flat. These mute yet emblematic forms, drawn or painted with subtle tonal gradations, are illuminated by irrational light emanating from unseen recesses, its mysterious sources veiled from sight by dense layers of graphite, soot, or paint. These ambiguous icons were, in Remington's words, simply the "natural elements of the landscape of an interior world."[v]

Remington's work represents a triumph of the iconic, yet these strange shapes do not resemble anything in particular. In the place of recognizable forms or identifiable symbols, the eye instead naturally settles on her meticulous textures and shading, the convergence of crisp contours and planes of flat color, thus elevating and transforming the importance of the gestural mark, a lasting sensibility from her Ab-Ex training. Remington's brooding yet ethereal forms seem ready to burst with meaning, which remains nonetheless out of reach. Form and content in her work are

Front cover, fig. 1. *Soot Series 1*, 1963. Soot and red crayon on muslin, 20¾ x 17 inches.

Above, fig. 2. *Early Adelphi Series #8*, 1963. Graphite and crayon on paper, 25½ x 12⅝ inches.

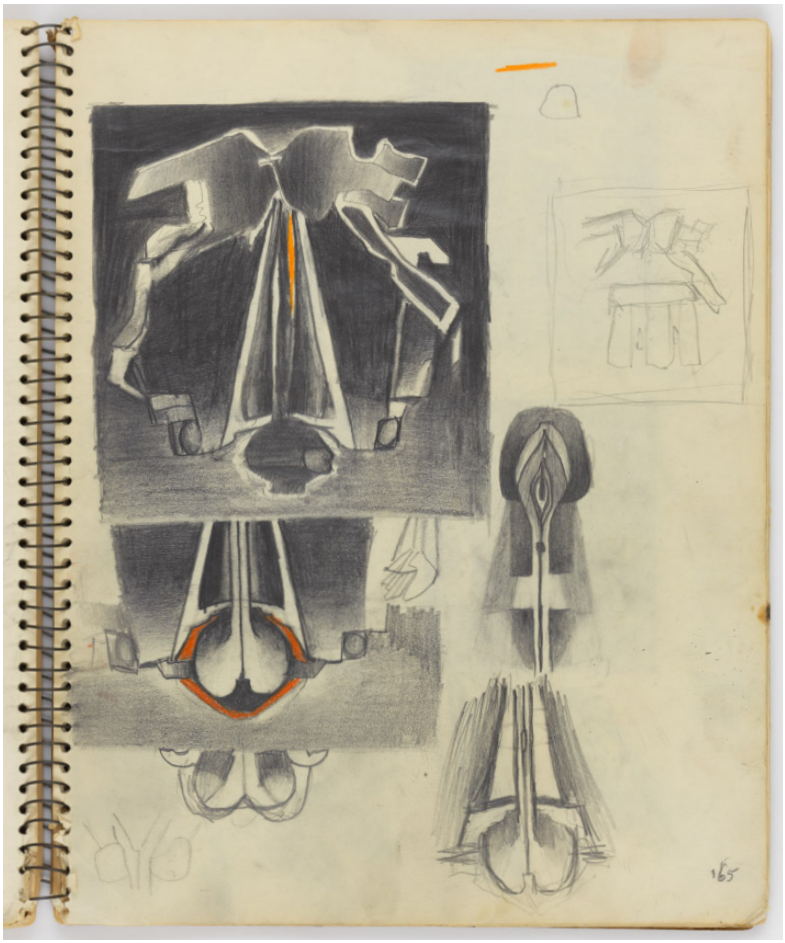


Fig. 3. *Untitled Sketchbook*, 1965–70. Graphite and red crayon on paper, 14 x 11 inches (spread, 14 x 22 inches).

entirely inextricable, each defining the contours of the other. Remington likened this dynamic of tense opposition to haiku, which creates meaning through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, a process which "makes the mind think."[6] Sensation here leads to cognition, and vice versa.

Only an artist as willful and determined as Remington could affect such a seamless union of opposing forces—light with dark, depth with flatness, figuration with abstraction, order with chaos, the real and the virtual.[7] Remington's portals lead to nowhere, her mirrors do not reflect, and her curious emblems remain stubbornly indecipherable. It was the notion of contradiction itself, the negotiation and play of opposing forces, which Remington sought to keep locked in a tenuous dance—forces which were not merely formal or stylistic in nature, but also symbolic and spiritual.

She expressed such notions of contradiction constantly and arguably most forcefully in her drawings, through various kinds of formal juxtapositions, like playing flat areas against gradations together with different kinds of line.[8] (fig. 2). Her facility with graphite, in the balancing of matte and lustrous surfaces, vigorous shading with granular modulation, is perhaps only rivaled by her contemporary Brice Marden, who showed his work alongside Remington's at New York's Bykert Gallery between the late 1960s and mid-1970s. No matter how smoothly graded or crisply outlined, Remington's work always bears the trace of her hand.

One of Remington's sketchbook drawings from 1965 (fig. 3) demonstrates both this evolutionary principle and her lifelong interest in paradox and contradiction. It is one of a group of detailed studies that read almost like biological specimens, diagrams of germinating seeds and insect anatomy, which are related to a suite of paintings from the mid- to late 1960s. As with much of her work from this period, a central "figure" is arrested with off-kilter symmetry, appearing at once profoundly static yet hinting at potential movement or growth. Typical of her drawings, Remington allows for only a glimmer of color, here slivers of red and orange crayon. At once seemingly

Fig. 4. *Adelphi Series #3*, 1963. Pencil and crayon on paper, 14¾ x 11½ inches

Fig. 5. *G.B. II*, 1963.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 36 inches.

Fig. 6. *Untitled (Adelphi Series)*, 1963.
Graphite and crayon on paper, 18⅜ x 12¼ inches.

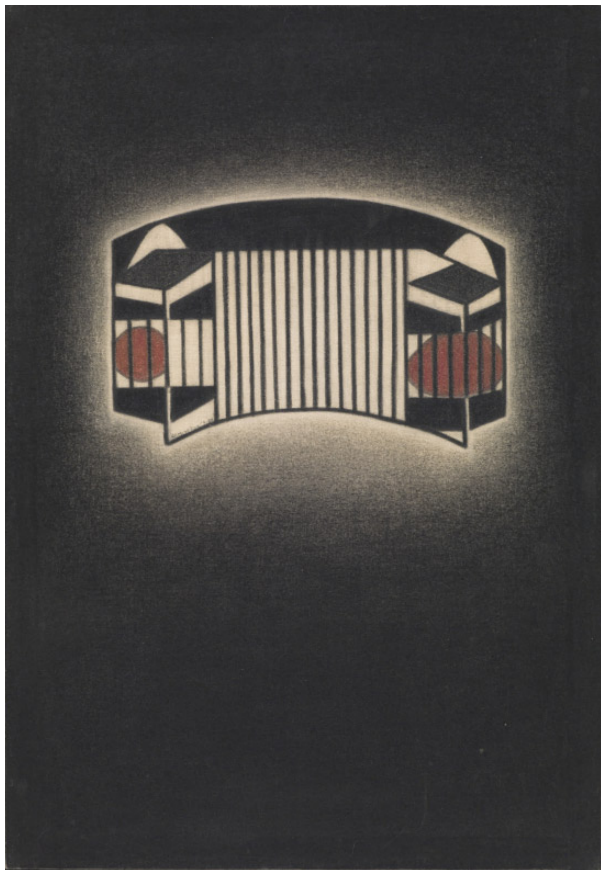


Fig. 7. *Soot Series 2*, 1963.
Soot and red crayon on muslin, 18½ x 12¾ inches.

Fig. 8. *Soot #11*, 1976.
Soot and colored pencil on paper, 25 x 19¼ inches.

mechanical and organic, Remington's imagery evokes comparison to modernist precursors, such as the erotic and surreal imagery in Marcel Duchamp's work. And while offhand comparisons to predecessors like Duchamp—or the steely shading of Leger's cubist works—can be partially illuminating, they fail to explain the mysterious sources or idiosyncratic evolution of her forms.

Remington recalls that many of the sketchbook studies and finished drawings (fig. 4) of this period "portrayed the wellspring of [her] imagination in terms of the imagery," and were directly tied to subsequent paintings, where some elements would be changed and then recombined with others (fig. 5).[9] While one might be tempted to trace the formal lineages connecting Remington's paintings to her drawings, they never yield to any particular rule or habit, and Remington seldom made traditional preparatory studies. Remington often explained that her drawing practice was never subordinate to her painting, but rather parallel, with a life all its own.[10]

Remington's *Adelphi* drawings, which she began in 1963, elegantly demonstrate this dialectical principle of unfolding oppositions and resemble, in their seemingly flattened folds, characteristics of origami or ceremonial kimonos (figs. 6 and 11). These works feature smoothly graduated tonalities that meet at crisply defined contours, which according to writer and artist John Mendelsohn, "have a hard-edged precision that paradoxically evokes a sense of animated life."[11] Each drawing in the *Adelphi* series, which originated in her sketchbook drawings, bears an index or trace of some prior permutation or iteration, now arrested in a new configuration. Their lack of coloration and exquisite shading make them appear almost photographic, or as if one were peering at unicellular life through an electron microscope.

In contrast to the palpably multidimensional compositions of the *Adelphi* series, Remington's *Soot* drawings elevate the iconic qualities of her work to a fever pitch (figs. 1, 7, and 8). These fully realized works, which she made starting in the mid-1960s, feature a central portal or emblem surrounded by halos of illumination that float in a field of intense darkness. These forms, like those in the *Adelphi* works, evoke multiple associations, though here they appear perhaps more mechanical than organic, like vintage car grilles or air vents. One might even recall Vija Celmins's 1964 trompe l'oeil painting of a space heater with its warming glow isolated against a field of gray. Despite Celmins's similar dedication to process and minimalist aesthetics, her depictions of everyday objects are usually frankly obvious, requiring little decipherment. In contrast, Remington's forms leave one puzzled, evoking tenuous associations and uncertain feelings, which help "make the mind think," as she put it.

Several of these works were executed on thin scrims of muslin, which were allegedly covered with soot from her fireplace, applied layer after layer.[12] Despite the muslin support, Remington nonetheless emphatically considered these works drawings. In contrast with works from the *Adelphi* series, which often feature passages and planes of polished graphite, these soot drawings remain indescribably matte and deep. The sense of unfolding change or metamorphosis characterizing Remington's *Adelphi* drawings is mostly absent in the *Soot* series, replaced with a deafening stillness and a smoldering interiority, manifested through Remington's judicious use of red crayon.

Remington's *Trace* drawings, dating from the late 1970s, feature elements characteristic of the *Adelphi* and *Soot* works, yet combine the delicate modulation of the former with the iconic presence of the latter (fig. 9). In addition to graphite, Remington also used black spray paint in the *Trace* series, the only instance of its use in her career.[13] And unlike the dark grounds typical of the two previous series, in the *Trace* works Remington floats darker forms against a white ground, delicately poised and balanced against one another in the manner of ikebana or the various strokes composing a calligraphic character. The dense multiplicity of overlapping forms present in the

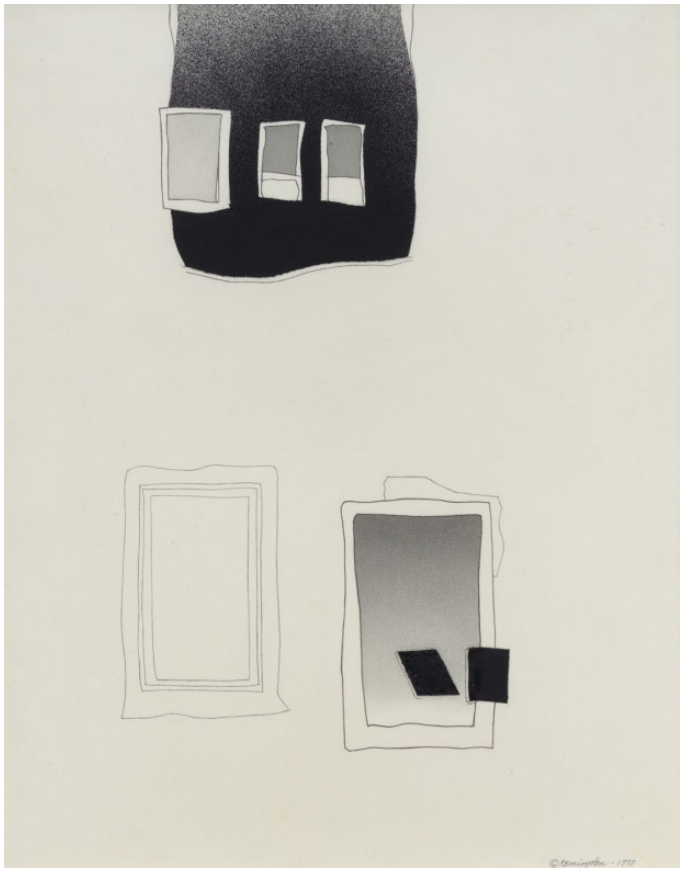


Fig. 9. *Trace Series #3*, 1973.
Black spray paint, pencil and graphite on paper, 14 x 11 inches.

Fig. 10. *Working study for Nardis*, 1979.
Oil and acrylic with collage on paper, 28½ x 25½ inches.

Fig. 11. *Early Adelphi Series #13*, 1967.
Pencil and crayon on paper, 24 x 18 inches.

Fig. 12. *Beinen II*, 1998.
Graphite and red crayon on paper, 72 x 42 inches.

Adelphi series, or the isolated singularity of the *Soot* series, is traded here for an elegant asymmetry of just a few elements—floating doorways, cloud forms, and squiggles—which more than in any of her works to date, suppress the idiosyncrasies of the hand.

Related to the *Traces* works are a handful of color studies from around the same time, such as *Working study for Nardis,* 1979 (fig. 10), which share a very similar formal vocabulary but more closely bridge the gap between what we traditionally understand as drawing and painting. Here, tonal gradations are replaced with chromatic gradations, but to similar effect. Electric blues and reds are prominent, and the vibratory quality of her edges, which seem both static and in motion simultaneously, are amplified with strips of painted paper collaged onto the surface, literalizing this subtle effect in low relief. Unlike most of her drawings, these works on paper are direct studies for subsequent paintings, yet they retain a playful sense of experimentation and immediacy. While most of her works on paper from the 1960s through the early 1980s remain relatively small in scale, in 1997 Remington began a suite of large drawings, six feet tall, which she worked on until 2001 (fig. 12).[14]

Despite the broad range of techniques and effects demonstrated by Remington's drawings over just two decades, her work remains remarkably consistent, the product of a diamond-sharp mind and singular vision turned in on itself, and then inside out again onto paper and canvas for the world to experience. Remington embodies the best tenets of modernism while doggedly forging her own path from the very beginning, following, as she put it, the "ungovernable need to express the contrary."[15] Out of these luminous voids, from seemingly inert matter—graphite, soot, paint—Remington draws veritable sparks of life.

1. Deborah Remington, in *Art '65: Lesser Known and Unknown Painters: Young American Sculpture, East to West*, exh. cat. (New York: Star Press, 1965). Catalogue of the exhibition held at the American Express pavilion at the 1964–65 New York World's Fair.
2. Remington's training in calligraphy while in Japan left a lasting impression in terms of her use of black, white, and shades of gray. As she recounted, "I have such a love of drawing, and [calligraphy] really inculcated a sense of black and white and gray, so drawing doesn't have to have color for me. The Japanese would always say, 'Can't you see the color there in the black and white?' It's implied, and if you're a really good artist and if the paintings are wonderful enough and if they really sing, then the viewer gets a sense of color. That influenced my work a lot, mostly the philosophy of calligraphy." Remington, quoted in Nancy M. Grace, "Inside and Around the 6 Gallery with Co-Founder Deborah Remington," (paper presented at The Beat Generation Symposium, Columbia College Chicago, October 11, 2008), Beat Studies Association, http://beatstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/6gallery.pdf, 4–5.
3. John Mendelsohn, "Deborah Remington: A Life in Drawing," in John Mendelsohn and Lilly Wei, *Deborah Remington: A Life in Drawing* (New York: Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts, 2016), 17.
4. Dore Ashton, "Deborah Remington," in Deborah Remington, Dore Ashton, and Paul Schimmel, *Deborah Remington: A 20-Year Survey*, exh. cat. (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1983), 17.
5. Remington, in *Art '65*.
6. Remington, in Grace, "Inside and Around," 5.
7. It is interesting to consider recent interpretations of Remington's work, such as those of art historian Suzanne Hudson, who discusses her work in the context of the rise of digital technology. Well before current developments in virtual reality, Remington was already working in it, literally painting the "virtually real." See Suzanne Hudson, "Hard Drives: Suzanne Hudson on the Art of Deborah Remington," *Artforum* 59, no. 4 (January/February 2021): 137–41.
8. See Deborah Remington, "Statement on Drawing," in Corinne Robins, *Drawing Now: 10 Artists*, exh. cat. (New York: Soho Center for the Visual Arts, 1976), n.p.
9. Deborah Remington, interview by Paul Cummings, "Oral History Interview with Deborah Remington, 1973 May 29–July 19," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-deborah-remington-13319#transcript.
10. Remington, "Statement."
11. Mendelsohn, "Deborah Remington," 18.
12. Ibid.
13. Lilly Wei, "Drawing It Out," in *Deborah Remington*, 24–25.
14. This group is known as the *Beinen* series, or "Bones" series. (The name is from the archaic German *bein* or "bone"; in modern usage *bein* means "leg.") These drawings invoke earlier flattened fossil-like forms from Remington's 1960s sketchbooks and finished drawings, now charged with new meaning, given her battle with cancer in the 1990s and 2000s.
15. Remington, "Statement."

The exhibition *Deborah Remington: Early Drawings* will be on view at Craig F. Starr Gallery from May 4 to July 30, 2021. For more information, please visit the exhibition page on our website at craigstarr.com.