

## Adrian Searle encounters: Roni Horn's mysterious drawings that just won't leave you alone

June 5, 2015 | By Adrian Searle

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**Words and names erupt from nowhere like a William Burroughs cut-up, clouds collide and paper seems to mutate into abstract sculpture before your very eyes in this major exhibition of the American artist's drawings**



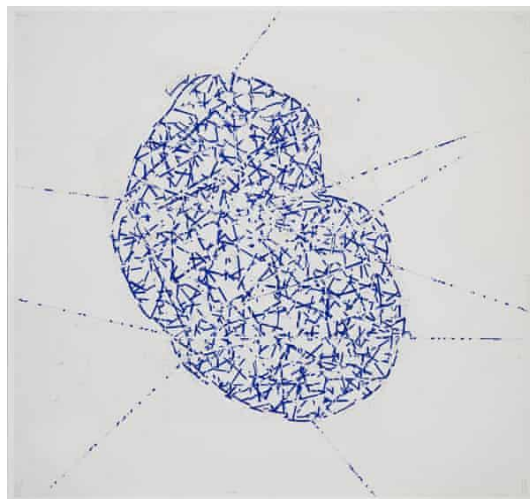
Detail from Hack Wit - fool's rainbow, 2014 by Roni Horn. [Click here to see the full image.](#)

Photograph: © Roni Horn/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Cakewalk. Quonset hut. Written on the Wind. Eyefuck. Words and more words fill Roni Horn's drawings in Butterfly Doubt, the largest exhibition of the American sculptor's drawings I have seen. Drawing precedes writing. For Horn the two are inextricable. There is no end to the words: movie titles, names, dirty words, nouns, conjunctions and slang. She has a way with words, and sense is not a part of it.

The spiralling vortices in Roni Horn's drawing Or 5 look like weather-systems seen from a satellite, or like bugs, pond life, things caught under a microscope and blown up huge. Other drawings in the Or series evoke weather too, clouds colliding or dropping rain down onto the huge sheets of paper above which they float, and are captured in a latticework of cuts and realignments.

Nature and weather are important to Horn and her art – she once compiled a book, Weather Reports You, in which dozens of Icelanders talk about the country's extreme and variable weather, and their relationship to it. Horn is as much concerned with the weather in the soul, emotional weather, as she is in cold fronts, south-easterlies, gales and pressure drops.



Or 1 2014 by Roni Horn. Photograph: © Roni Horn/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Look again and the drawings make you think of heads and brains, or mash-ups of Islamic or Celtic pattern, fragments reassembled out of order into new and surprising forms. They're all arcs and vectors, broken tessalations and cells. As much as I grasp for ways to describe these drawings, to relate them to some kind of stable imagery, they mutate into something else.

Five of her Or drawings fill one large gallery at London's Hauser & Wirth gallery. They are inescapably physical things. It isn't only the dense lines of varnished, powdered pigment and charcoal that makes them so. The heavy sheets of Arches paper have been cut and recut many times, fragments of drawing rotated and realigned to make surprising and complex forms that appear organic – as much as one is aware of shearing, slicing, razoring, jamming, and joining. Each is in fact a splicing and rearrangement of two separate drawings. They look as if they were made for each other, which they probably were.

As you begin to investigate them, the forms begin to appear three dimensional – Tacita Dean has called them "dysfunctional honeycombs". Looking at them can be like the experience of walking around a complex abstract sculpture: you can never quite grasp it in its entirety. If there is one. They are incomplete diagrams, details, instances. There was no whole to begin with, only a segment of something bigger that reveals itself in glimpses over all the series of drawings that she has been making for years. Her art is cumulative, and her drawings especially so.

**“Words erupt and interrupt the drawings. At times they are the words that creep up on you in the night and won't go away”**

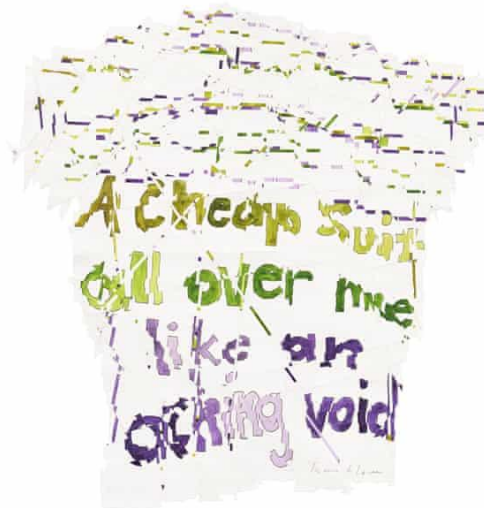
Up close you become aware not just of the numerous sharp cuts and reassembly, but of pencil notations, numbers, scorings, and signs that the artist has circumnavigated the drawing, and worked on it as though she were a cartographer, mapping a new place, and writing little notes to herself as she goes.

Words erupt and interrupt the Or drawings, repeating and stuttering and appearing out of nowhere. Sometimes they are like the rain of words that spilled out of Tristan Tzara's hat in a Dadaist cabaret. At other times they are the words that creep up on you in the middle of the night and won't go away.

There are names: Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, American writer Lydia Davis, jazz and blues singers Shirley Horn (no relation), Billie Holiday and Alberta Hunter. Was she listening to these singers as she drew? Is that why the Pogues are in there too? Maybe they are shout-outs of the things Horn likes. Did Charlie Hebdoe get in there because the name was in the air?

The words in the Or drawings are a kind of interference. They don't annotate the drawings and the drawings don't illustrate the words. They come simple and declarative. They rhyme and sprawl and stand alone. Crop, hop, Coca, lyme, toper. Suck, fuck, trigger. Duck, dove, suck. Love, love again.

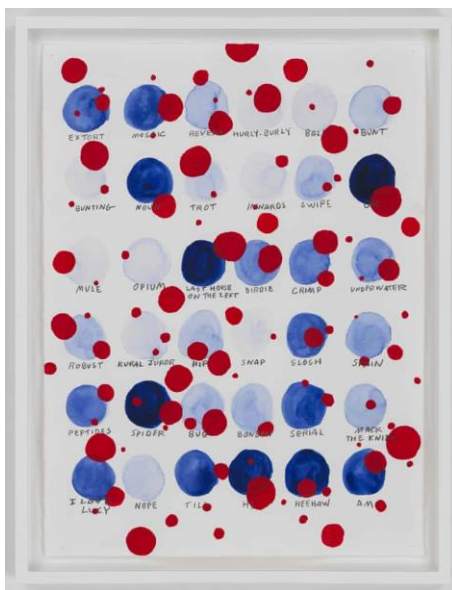
One Or drawing is like a bug caught in a spider's web. The words stick there too. In another the words cascade along with a kind of drawn rain, or rays of sunlight angled through clouds. Nag, rag, lob, fob, bob, nob. No wonder scat-singer Betty Carter makes her appearance. But what the hell is “nematode” doing here?



Hack Wit - aching cheap, 2014 by Roni Horn Photograph: © Roni Horn/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

A second series here, Hack Wit, plays on commonplace phrases, colliding and splicing them physically on the paper. The writing appears woozy on the spliced-together papers, and surrounded by stutterings. Working with watercolour, pen and ink, a scalpel and tape, Horn makes drawings as though seen through a fractured glass. The collisions are visual as much as verbal. "A fool's rainbow chasing paradise", reads one, "A cheap suit all over me like an aching void" another. The technique (so far as she has one) is reminiscent of William Burroughs's cut-ups, but the word play is more playful and benign, though there is an sardonic edginess here too. Think how sharp a paper edge can cut.

In a book accompanying the Hack Wit drawings, Canadian poet and classicist Ann Carson writes a text that at one point collides the English "peasant poet" John Clare and Marilyn Monroe. "They were both peasants," Carson writes, "both lit by an all-consuming genius and woe ... They might have knocked each other's socks off ... instead each died alone." Carson's collisions mirror Horn's, and she splices what seem to be Horn's words (it is hard to know, exactly) with her own. Carson takes Horn's art somewhere it hadn't been before. Which I guess is our job too.



Remembered Words - (Drive-in), 2013 by Roni Horn. Photograph: © Roni Horn/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

A third series fills the last room. Remembered Words consists of 15 groups of nine framed drawings. They line the walls. Each drawing and each group could be a colour chart, an eye test or a language game. Most present hand-painted, almost circular gouache blobs, laid out in 6x5 grids. Some look like astronomical observations of the moon on a murky night, others, a fastidious watercolourist's palette. There are grids of full black discs, blobs of faded siennas and mousey greys, darker and washed-out blues, charts of gradations from full-strength colour to the weakest dilute hues.

**“Each drawing could be a colour chart, an eye test or a language game. Some look like astronomical observations”**

This is where things begin to get complicated. While some grids present colour alone, in others each blob is accompanied by a word. There's no sense to it: arrangement, cervix, Agnes Moorehead. Butt plug, waddle, crease. On one sheet we go from Blue Devils to soil, by way of hydrophobia, spider crab, pretzel and wisecracs. There are dirty words, drugs (opiates, mostly) and curse words, places and names. What's Jakarta doing here?

Sometimes the circles proliferate and break up the grid, words disappearing under blobs that have machine-gunned the surface. Sometimes the words flee altogether. But they're sneaky. They won't leave us alone. As soon as things go quiet, they start up again. The words are like the weather passing through.

Roni Horn Butterfly Doubt is at Hauser & Wirth, London, from 5 June to 25 July