

ESSAYS

Fieldwork

Luminosity and an almost metaphysical purity strike the viewer when first encountering the white-on-white, pristine minimal drawings of Marietta Hoferer. Weightless and evanescent, the faint pencil lines and clear tape that she uses to create her works on paper are imperceptible at first glance and require the observer to quietly adjust his or her perception to their subtlety. One must closely examine them, walk up to them and around the room to experience how they respond to the light. It is then that one marvels at the vast variety of systems and patterns and the “voluptuous” qualities of her nominal materials.

Lucidity, analysis and logic are attributes that characterize this German-born, New York-based artist. Her systematic approach to drawing, employing a concise structural framework, determines how the work is formatted prior to its execution. Yet in Hoferer’s devotion to precision and exactitude, an impulse for the vague and the wandering emerges. Her predilection for the grid, symmetry and seriality dealing with concepts of limit and measurement inevitably finds its dichotomy, revealing infinitude and entropy. Behind the severity imposed by the rigorous definition of the drawings’ structure and deliberate execution, lies a hedonism that relaxes these restrictions and allows for the occurrence of chance, movement and mutability, uncertainty and the undefined in the process.

Unlike the orthodoxy of the minimalist fathers such as Sol LeWitt, Hoferer imparts a relaxed eclecticism in her drawing that allows for detours and departures from the severe approach of the earlier generation. Beneath the apparent crispness and stark order, there is an entropic sensibility. Hoferer welcomes contingencies and internalizes chance in the making of the work. Playfulness and sensuality soften the severity of the cooler, rational sensibility with ingenious games and unexpected disruptions to the operational logic of the work and the formal qualities of her materials. The industrial tape and the hand-drawn graphite lines are foils for one another, which creates cunning paradoxes. The hard line of the tape may be undermined by its stretchiness and only approximate applied rows; while pencil lines, though imprinted with the natural variations produced by the hand (pressure, speed, stops and starts, tiredness), may achieve exactitude when drawn with a ruler. Hoferer enjoys exploring and contesting these dichotomies.

Challenging the very systems that she imposes on her drawings as if “the one that creates the rule creates the tramp,” she deliberately introduces disruptions that have less to do with her lack of endurance to carry out the self-imposed tasks than with the intellectual quest of solving how to break out of them. This liberating effect catches the viewer off guard, inciting a closer look to discover the drawing’s internal logic.

Whereas LeWitt’s radical approach had reduced drawing to a set of instructions no longer requiring the execution by the artist but by anyone simply following the instructions, Hoferer does make the drawings herself. Draftsmanship (or craftsmanship) is here clearly intended, not for reasons of originality as much as to allow for the potential of chance and to emphasize the idea of process in the making of the drawings.

Process and the parameters of the physical condition of the piece determine its eventual form. As in Dorothea Rockburne’s seminal 1960s drawing series titled *Drawing Which Makes Itself*, the drawing is generated from the qualities inherent in the materials. Hoferer chooses materials for their physical properties such as luminosity, translucency and invisibility, reflectivity, glossiness, mattness and frosted texture or because they age and discolor over time as in this series *Field 1998-2006*. Her choice of white only proves to offer unconstrained variations of “whiteness,” following in the footsteps of monochrome painters, most obviously Robert Ryman. She uses a great variety of tapes -Scotch brand, strapping and masking- that change in size and texture, translucency and reflectivity.

In applying the tape in vertical and/or horizontal bands and multiple layers, an interplay of shadow and light is achieved, with incredible shades of white and gray and dynamic optical shifts, glittering and shimmering, surfacing or fading away as one moves around the work. These advancing and receding rhythms give a kinetic quality to Hoferer’s drawings similar to the 1960s pop-op elements of Bridget Riley. The relationship of the drawings to the site and to the viewer’s reception suggests the dynamic and subtle shifts in the environment and intrinsically the passage of time in space, a sense of transience and impermanence.

This attention to the physical qualities of the materials and to the transient phenomenological conditions of light and space external to the drawing infuses Hoferer’s work with a much gentler (even feminine) touch. Her engagement with sensuality is not a detriment to her commitment to minimalism but places her closer to a lineage of artists who have favored process and an interest in materials, and shares a greater affinity with the likes of “abstract eccentrics” like Eva Hesse than with structuralist minimalists like LeWitt. The geometric, algebraic and rational tendencies of the intellect and the world of the senses are not mutually exclusive in Hoferer’s work, on the contrary, they seem to complement and lead one another.

Reproductions of Hoferer’s works could look like digitally pixelated drawings or something more traditional, like petit point. They are hand-rendered, using the grid to blanket an entire sheet, playing with negative/positive variations of a theme with results that differ from subtly spare geometric lines to the more ornamental. Some drawings are quieter and reductive in their formal means, where merely faint pencil lines and clear tape stress lightness, requiring acute attention to perceive their nuance. Others seem baroque by comparison presenting dense layers of textured tape that sculpturally build in a constructivist style, borrowing designs from architecture and/or the decorative arts, which look like building blocks or lace doilies and snowflakes.

Built in clusters of separate sheets of paper, some series share a single pattern running horizontally across the panels, optically formatted in a grid, and reaching the very edge of the paper been(?) framed by the wall. In other cases, the singularity of the drawing is stressed by displaying individual concentric motifs framed in the center of each sheet with margins around them or around the multiple modular works, bringing unity within the grid. Joining in multiples alters the scale and nature of the single drawing. Square sheets build onto vertical or horizontal grids following a drawing's internal structural laws or the external conditions as site-specific works that enter into a dialogue with the architecture of the space in which they are exhibited. The unframed multiple panels are tightly stretched and pinned to the wall, bringing to mind the literal association with wall paper.

Installation in response to the space surrounding them and the favoring of phenomenological issues of perception in space or, rather, entering into a dialogue with one another to draw the attention to specific elements of the patterns, systems and materials intrinsic to the drawing, prove to be just one of the broad issues at play in Marietta Hoferer's work. Thus, albeit their deceptively simple appearance, her minimal drawings reveal themselves to expand in ways unlimited by the drawing's structural possibilities and the physical properties of her materials, uncannily finding in the limitations infinite permutations.

Mercedes Vicente,
Curator of Contemporary Art
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand

Chance and Necessity

Marietta Hoferer's collages made out of clear tape are based on a regular, modular composition of symmetrical patterns arranged into a grid format. Yet, minute differences in the size and texture of the tape affects its reflectivity, producing endless variations in the luminosity of the drawing, whose surface changes constantly under the eyes of the viewer like the surface of water.

Isabelle Dervaux
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Drawings,
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY

The Presence of Absence

Marietta Hoferer's labor-intensive stripe "drawings" are made from grid-like arrangements of tape, their white-on-white composition toying with a minimalist conception of absence. Yet in their careful construction, the result of a meticulous process, the often highly wrought surface also bear the mark of time, resisting any easy reading of the works as simple phenomenological conceits.

João Ribas
Art critic, writer and curator at the Drawing Center in New York City

Visible / Invisible

Alexandria is the title that Marietta Hoferer gave to one of her new works. She has never been there nor is there any actual relationship between her taped relief and the legendary city, she said, but the name had come up in conversation and it somehow seemed to be the right title. Like the dreamscapes that Italo Calvino conjures in his book, *Invisible Cities*, Hoferer's Alexandria is an imagined place. It is a name that inspires memories, dreams, desires, a convergence of visible and invisible patterns and interlocked, ephemeral juxtapositions. At the nexus of the subjective and objecthood, Hoferer's Alexandria, like all her work of the past several years, is both a relief and a drawing. It is made of tape, square in format and its composition suggests an intricate white-on-white mosaic floor, wall relief or inlaid panel, a game board, architectural plan or minimalist schematic. It is also a superimposition of one thing over another—a history, a thought, a line, a shape, a light, a shadow, a color. Composed of half inch squares, like tessera, each is a 4-tiered stack of successively smaller squares cut from tape that, assembled, forms a grid of solid and space, the light playing off the slight differences in elevations, the whole changing under changing light conditions, animated.

Hoferer works only with tape at this juncture, usually transparent and white tape although white—and even the transparent—has an infinite number of shadings. She first began to work with tape when she came to New York from Germany in 1993, fascinated by the sheer number of available varieties. Before that, she had studied sculpture and drawing and has an M.F.A in sculpture from the Hochschule der Künste Berlin. Her works might be categorized as minimalist, although that only means she prefers to work within certain formal parameters that include linear and geometric configurations, the systemic and serialized and the use of one color and one material. Hoferer's reductivism, however, is not so much an ideological stance as it is an aesthetic practice. Known for her meticulous, labor-intensive pattern pieces, Hoferer is a virtuoso with tape and the range of effects she can achieve with it is remarkably similar to what can be achieved through drawing and even painting, from varying textures to a sense of dimensionality, to chiaroscuro and subtle coloring, depending upon the kind of tape used and its distinctive properties. Tape might be considered a mediated form of expression, the gesture not as direct from eye to hand to mark but Hoferer believes it is not so

different from drawing with a pencil or other implement to make line and shape.

Hoferer's field is often square, ranging in size from intimate to large-scale installations. Of the half dozen or so works in this exhibition, some are grids and the remainder are variations on a series of horizontal lines that extend the width of the surface. Hoferer's strategies include, for instance, changing the width of the tape and the interval between tape and ground. For instance, she might make a work banded with tape 1/2 inch in width, placed with a 3/4 inch interval between bands, edged by a penciled line. The graphite would emit a faint glimmer of color (or was it light?) that is hard to pinpoint. Almost subliminally, the lines would add a provisional, transient dazzle to the construct, reminiscent of Agnes Martin's fine, repetitive markings that capture light and give it definition.

The same composition of horizontal bands might be altered slightly by layering, overlaying a 3/4 inch strip, say, with a 1/2 inch one, the interval between bands set at 1 inch. Although always white on white, Hoferer's choice of whites creates an immense difference—if you are attentive—and the lustrous pearl of one band plays against the opaque vanilla of the other as well as the white of the ground.

Yet another construction might be to create three-tiered bands with regular spacings between them, arranged in a grid composition. Since the strips of tape are laid down by hand, there are always slight irregularities in the rectilinearity of the patterns that, in turn, emit a delicate visual vibrato. The white might be warmer, with a hint of yellow. At the edges of the tape, there might appear a flash of violet, yellow's complementary, but it is so elusive that it might also have been imagined, like the "color" of her thin penciled lines. These variations, however, are not calculated and are more the results of intuition, of choices made in progress.

The pleasure and meaning of Hoferer's understated, nuanced work is in its details. Altered by light, it is a web of shifting, phenomenal perceptions and intimations that represents a way of seeing art and the world—a way of, in the end, being in the world.

Lilly Wei

New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who contributes to many publications in the United States and abroad. She has written regularly for Art in America since 1982 and is a contributing editor at ARTnews and Art Asia Pacific.

Off the Grid

The wonderment of Marietta Hoferer's work lies in its simultaneous consistency and divergence. On one hand, it is assuring to spot the quintessential Hoferer: the drawings are symmetrical, shimmering, subtly monochromatic and consistent in the scale of their geometric elements. On the other hand, her works reveal definitive choices of tape size and nuance of color to achieve harmonious visual compositions with a near infinite range of pattern and luminosity. To confront her actual drawings is to experience an amazing alliance of craftsmanship and creativity.

Marietta Hoferer's current works on paper have as their ultimate Western precedent the innovative collages by Picasso and Braque including Picasso's seminal *Still Life with Chair Caning* from 1912. Unknown from 2000-01, with its plotted pencil lines and strapping tape, echoes the patterned caning employed by Picasso, but it does not make direct allusions to the trappings of material experience. Hoferer's paucity of material choice as well as subtle color shifts and the implementation of grids and series, broadly categorizes her work as post-minimalist, a movement traceable to Eva Hesse, Richard Tuttle and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among others. However, for some observers, the dazzling visual effects of Hoferer's work conjure up the complex patterns of the Op Art practitioners including Victor Vasarely, Richard Anuskevich and Bridget Riley. While the German-born Hoferer shares formal traits and visual goals with these two seminal movements, her work moves beyond a well-formed composition to reveal carefully rendered, freely hung, warm, fragile, tactile drawings.

Moving beyond art historical terms, Hoferer's recent pieces conjure the intricate patterns and rich surfaces often praised in petit point, Islamic tiles, Roman mosaics, table cloths, wallpaper, basketry and even snowflakes. In C-11, the work's surface reaches a level of craftsmanship that is unprecedented among the rare artists who work only on paper. Despite the numerous aforementioned references, Hoferer's collages remain wholly original and aesthetically inspirational. With no utilitarian purpose, they serve as vehicles to investigate the infinite realms of pattern and light.

Brian Young, Curator
Academy Art Museum
Easton, MD