

Drawing Today

Recent Additions to the Collection

The Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) at the Kunstmuseum Basel houses approximately 300,000 works spanning seven centuries. These holdings continue to grow thanks to new purchases and generous donations. Now, the *Drawing Today* exhibition will showcase around two hundred contemporary drawings by Michael Armitage, Martin Assig, Silvia Bächli, Miriam Cahn, Róza El-Hassan, Pélagie Gbaguidi, Leiko Ikemura, Renée Levi, and Maja Rieder, most of which have been added to the collection over the past decade. These works highlight the multifaceted nature of the medium. Drawings can be abstract or figurative, deliberate or spontaneous. They are able to probe questions of individual and collective identity within a larger context of cultural or religious conflict. Or by making use of broad strokes and rich colors, a drawing can challenge the separation between drawing and painting.

Drawing has never been as open as it is today. Drawings can chart the development of ideas and pictorial compositions or installations from sketch to polished design. Drawing can also offer an autonomous means of exploring and interrogating the world whether through everyday life, an artist's inner world, or global political issues. It can be practiced in a sketchbook, on loose sheets and rolls of paper, on walls, or across other surfaces. When executed using broad brushstrokes, drawing might also come to resemble painting.

The drawings in this exhibition represent a broad spectrum of styles. They include abstract works by Bächli, Levi, and Rieder, who are deeply concerned with the process of drawing. These works are produced with a plan in mind, but they are far from premeditated; rather, the process of creation leaves a great deal of room for deviation. The drawings by El-Hassan and Ikemura move between figuration and abstraction; people are discernible, but just barely, often remaining elusive. We also see human figures in the works of Armitage, Assig, Cahn, and Gbaguidi, yet each artist depicts them in diverse ways.

What all these various drawings have in common is the visibility of the creative process and the significance of the materials chosen. While Cahn uses deep black charcoal to lend her people and animals a powerful effect, Armitage and Ikemura value fluidly applied, watery colors that at times seem fleeting. All the artists pay close attention to the size and quality of the paper they select. For Bächli, for instance, the white of the paper plays as important a role as do her drawn lines. Gbaguidi, meanwhile, uses pages from an old publication whose content intersects meaningfully with the theme of her drawings.

NEUBAU Basement

1 Renée Levi

The Basel-based artist Renée Levi (b. 1960, Istanbul) paints in a style characterized by lines, swirls, loops, waves, and free gestures. Her intensely colorful round work *Eye 5050* (2002) was produced with fluorescent red spray paint on wood. Here, the proximity to drawing and writing is palpable. The artist only began exhibiting her drawings on paper in 2012. Though created in parallel to the paintings, these works are autonomous. Levi's focus is on the process and how it manifests itself on the page. Thus, her drawing is an expression of the gesture executed by the hand rather than the result of a striving for a specific line. In a group of works from 2011–12, the artist applied ink and watercolor to paper with a brush and then set these into motion by tilting the sheet from side to side, bringing the drawings into being through a play of chance and control. The artist's choice of paper plays an essential role, as the effect varies depending on whether the paper absorbs or repels the ink and paint.

2 Maja Rieder

The works of the Basel-based artist Maja Rieder (b. 1979, Niederbipp) demonstrate that the boundaries between drawing and painting have long been blurred. Nevertheless, she herself states that she is a draughtswoman. Using a broad brush, she applies layers of gouache and ink to large sheets of paper. The larger the surface, the more intensely engaged her body becomes. The artist places great importance on her use of paper, bringing its materiality to the fore as much as that of the paint and her brushwork. She folds paper, stretching it over a wooden frame, and then draws on it with a large brush—a process in which the paint can run over the edges. She then removes the paper from the frame and unfolds it so it can be hung on a wall. The folds and creases remain visible, emphasizing the materiality and three-dimensionality of the paper. It therefore becomes far more than just a neutral support for the drawing.

3 Silvia Bächli

The early eighteen-part drawing installation *Ist die schwarze Köchin da?* (Is the Black Cook Around?, 1988) by Basel-based artist Silvia Bächli (b. 1956, Baden) is grounded in graphic adaptations of everyday impressions, such as the movement of a hand or an object such as a vessel or a necklace. In the top row hang six variations of a woman's torso with bare breasts. Although her face is not shown, these "portraits" still make one feel observed. The installation title refers to a nineteenth-century rhyme used in the 1950s and '60s for a children's community-building circle and dance game. To soften the racist connotation at the time in this pedagogical context, the cook's Black face was attributed to the soot and smoke of the kitchen. In Bächli's work, the title refers to the role of women, as well as to their physicality. In later years, the artist increasingly dispensed with the figurative. Bächli's process of drawing and underlying use of movement produce brushstrokes that seize attention. Increasingly, omission has become a central aspect of her method. Although these drawings produced between 2007 and 2017 are individual works, they can be placed in relation to one another, opening a space that extends far beyond the edges of the sheet.

4 Leiko Ikemura

The Japanese-Swiss artist Leiko Ikemura (b. 1951, Tsu, Mie Prefecture) lives in Berlin. She began her career as a graphic artist but is now renowned for her paintings and sculptures and she prefers to exhibit her works on paper in dialogue with them. Ikemura frequently works with watercolors, allowing them to flow freely across the sheet. In her 2019 series, *Shadow Girl*, the figures of girls are discernible yet elusive. She applies watercolor wet-on-wet to paper. The outlines of her figures are clearly visible, yet nonetheless they remain blurred. Their forms are in the process of emerging: they do not yet have faces, and their feet are not yet firmly on the ground. The genesis of

these girls as spiritual beings seems more important than their physicality. The artist's Japanese heritage is evident in the way her pictorial world elides the strict separation between human and nature, body and soul, and dream and reality. Her drawings do not reflect a preconceived idea but rather capture the moment in which a thought or an image first germinates. In recent years, she has also produced freely improvised abstract sheets. Some examples from 2018 are exhibited here.

5 Michael Armitage

The British-Kenyan painter Michael Armitage (b. 1981, Nairobi) lives in Nairobi and Indonesia. He takes the subject of his drawings both from everyday life in Kenya and from the internet. They range from traditional African rituals to observed street protests. These drawings form a collection of motifs that he uses for his complex paintings. Armitage applies Prout's brown ink to paper in glazed layers. This ink, traditionally used by architects, is not waterproof, which allows it to be moistened and reworked. The artist's tonal brushwork with its chiaroscuro effects brings out expressive facial features and postures, capturing fleeting moments with economy and sensitivity. His focus is on figures and fragments of bodies, while his backgrounds remain undefined. Armitage's brush drawing technique has been often compared to the drawing practice of Francisco de Goya.

6 Pélagie Gbaguidi

Pélagie Gbaguidi (b. 1965, Dakar) lives in Brussels and describes herself as a Beninese artist. She fills countless notebooks with notes on encounters, current events, archival research, and her reading. These notes serve as the starting point for drawings she executes on individual sheets, long rolls of paper, or directly onto walls. Gbaguidi addresses colonial and post-colonial history, revisiting archival material and stories of violence and racism from today's perspective in an attempt to forestall

forgetting. The series *La chaîne humaine* (The Human Chain, 2022) is executed on pages torn from an encyclopedia about the flora of Katanga (formerly a province of the Democratic Republic of Congo). Her drawings seek to “overwrite” the European perception of Africa as a place to exploit resources. As a member of the African diaspora in Europe, Gbaguidi uses the motif of the human chain to thematize a hoped-for solidarity between people of different nations and cultures.

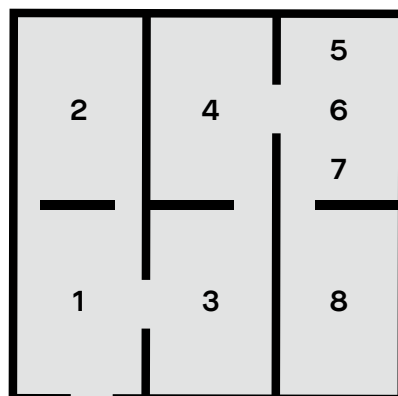
7 Róza El-Hassan

A connection might be made between Armitage and Gbaguidi and the work of Syrian-Hungarian artist Róza El-Hassan (b. 1966, Budapest). In a drawing from 2007, for example, El-Hassan also takes up the motif of the human chain. The artist engages with issues of migration as well as political and religious conflict. Her drawings navigate the field of tension between ornament and figuration, consistently exploring the question of her own identity. The thirty drawings titled *Sketches for Overpopulation—Clothes* (2000) feature designs for garments. The provocative inscription “I am overpopulation” on her design for an orange T-shirt links to the artist’s performances, posing the question of what becomes “too many” when there is not enough room for every population group. Who must make way? Her abstract, ornamented sheets reference designs by avant-garde Soviet female artists of the early twentieth century, which combined standardized clothing with an ideal of cultural and social renewal. This utopian idea is echoed in El-Hassan’s drawings.

8 Miriam Cahn

Miriam Cahn (b. 1949, Basel) lives and works in Graubünden. Although she is now primarily known as a painter, her artistic journey began with drawing, which continues to play a significant role in her work. Cahn’s charcoal drawings are produced on delicate paper but are powerful in execution and forceful in effect.

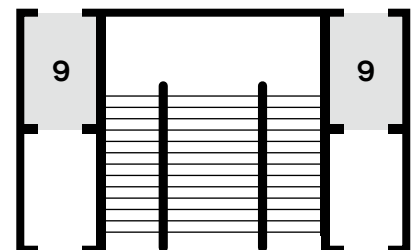
They often comprise series or installations that fill entire walls and rooms. For many years, Cahn would draw on the floor—kneeling, crouching, or lying down—and occasionally worked with her eyes closed. Imprints of her fingers, feet, and other body parts remain as visible traces of the process and her physical presence. The artist’s experiences and memories manifest on paper as female energies, for example in *blutungsarbeit* (bleeding work), the title she gives to series created in the days before her menstrual period. War and violence are central themes in Cahn’s work, from the Bosnian War and the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York to the mass migration of refugees to Europe. She thematizes sexual assaults on women and the vulnerability of the body with a particular intensity while also challenging established stereotypes of women as peace-loving and protective.



HAUPTBAU 1st Floor

9 Martin Assig

Martin Assig (b. 1959, Schwelm) lives and works in Berlin and Brädikow. He uses brush and ink to create drawings with spare, rather tentative lines that nonetheless do not appear fleeting. Assig often sketches people as fragments, depicting either just torsos or faceless heads. For him, the beings that inhabit these corporeal fragments are more important than their physical appearance. Unworn garments bear witness to the bodies that once inhabited them, suggesting vessels or hiding places for people similar to buildings, bodies, or other containers. Bodies are also mere shells and organic dwellings for souls. Assig explores themes of spirituality, death, and his own transience. Inwardly attuned, he brings forth on paper states of existence and feelings of pain and fear, as well as liberation. The result is a touching visual poetry. For Assig, the material and the visible are merely an attempt to conceptualize the immaterial.



The Growth of the Collection

This exhibition offers valuable insight into the Kupferstichkabinett's acquisitions strategy. One of its central aims is to amass larger groups of drawings by individual artists in order to enable a deeper understanding of their artistic approach. This stands in contrast to so-called encyclopedic collecting, which focuses on gathering a small selection of works by as many artists as possible. Thanks to these continually growing groups of works, it is possible for *Drawing Today* to devote entire rooms to single artists.

Since the early 1980s, the Kupferstichkabinett has amassed large collections of works by Bächli, Cahn, and Ikemura. These stem not only from acquisitions, but also from joint exhibition projects, frequent exchanges, and trusted relationships with collectors and foundations. Levi and Rieder, on the other hand, are represented with smaller groups of works that have entered the collection only recently.

In the last few years, the Kunstmuseum Basel has also prioritized increasing the diversity of the artists selected for its collection. Armitage and Gbaguidi, for example, are globally significant artists with African roots. Their figurative drawings bring intercultural issues into play in quite different ways. These approaches broaden our perspective on the world, allowing us to consider highly topical social issues.

Purchases, Gifts, and Permanent Loans

Drawing Today highlights the numerous ways in which works have entered the collection. Some have been purchased with funds from the Canton of Basel-Stadt. However, a substantial portion of recent acquisitions was made possible by institutions. For instance, the acquisition of two groups of works by Levi and Rieder was financed by the Hans and Renée Müller-Meylan Foundation. Indeed, this foundation has made it possible to regularly acquire work by Basel-based artists since 1999.

Gbaguidi's drawings are on eternal permanent loan from the Hüni-Michel-Stiftung, which has helped the Kupferstichkabinett to establish groups of drawings by female artists since 2016. The works by Armitage were acquired with support from the Efen Fund of the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft Basel, which facilitates acquisitions of works by artists with African roots. And an important purchase of works by Bächli was realized thanks to funds from the Karl and Margrith Schaub-Tschudin-Stiftung.

Equally important are the numerous gifts from the artists themselves. Assig and Ikemura, for instance, made generous donations to the Kupferstichkabinett in early 2024. Finally, private collectors have played a vital role in expanding the museum's holdings. They include Theresa and Jakob Tschopp-Janssen of Basel, who made a generous donation (on permanent loan from the Friends of the Kunstmuseum Basel). Hans Rudolf and E. Regula Baumgartner of Arlesheim as well as Catherine and Bernard Dreyfus Soguel of Basel also made significant gifts.

Öffnungszeiten / Opening Hours / Heures d'ouverture

Di–So 10–18 Uhr / Tue–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m. / Mar–Dim 10h–18h

Mi 10–20 Uhr / Wed 10 a.m.–8 p.m. / Mer 10h–20h

Sonderöffnungszeiten / Special opening hours /

Heures d'ouverture spéciales → [kunstmuseumbasel.ch/besuch](https://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/besuch)

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#kunstmuseumbasel

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Curator: Anita Haldemann

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