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Frances Richardson creates surfaces at the zero degree of drawing. Using an array of pencils with varying hardness, she builds her compositions up from thousands of minute negative (-) and positive (+) signs, the most minimal of mark-making gestures. From a distance, these fields of gray demonstrate a precise symmetry of shading, constructed around multiple nodes or across contrast gradients; close-up, the pencil marks form tracks that meander in curves and spirals, evoking a false sense of spontaneity within the rigidity of the larger structure. Each dash or cross mark is just slightly curved or slightly off-axis, contributing to the rhythmic flow of curving lines and tracks. The overall effect is topographic, and the symmetrical patterns suggest organic influences, but elude any literal readings of specific natural forms. The designs are “remembered patterns,” formal resonances of shape and form, like the structures of memories without content or context. Enforcing this point, almost all of Richardson’s drawings simply bear their dates as titles; seriality is used to suppress any anthropomorphic associations or cultural specificity.

The delicate nature of Richardson’s work cannot be easily represented through reproduction. The surfaces not only demand extended viewing, but also actually respond to the act of looking. Slowly scanning the image causes one’s eyes to adapt to the graduated contrast shifts, which in turn causes the peripheral patterns to shift and shimmer. “It is like breathing on skin,” Richardson describes. The effect of these small contractions and expansions is like a vibration or pulsation that matches, and so makes conscious, the rhythm of viewing.

While Richardson’s earlier works, such as *10798* (1998), attempt to layer a texture of larger pencil marks on top of the natural texture of handmade Indian paper, her current drawings are made on large white manufactured sheets that dissolve into the whiteness of the gallery wall, leaving the image floating in space. The circular shape of *C 1 030502* (2002) thus appears to be a singularly resolved surface or membrane, while the surface of the paper becomes immaterial and, at best, seemingly invisible. This effect is heightened in *042002* (2002), where, on a large gesso board, an intense visual field overcomes or makes unnecessary any framing device. The amplified scale and horizontal format, reminiscent of 1960s Minimalist painting, plays with the distance of perception by maintaining a tension between the macro cloud-like shape in which the center fades to lightness and the micro frenzy of claustrophobic activity.

Richardson’s most recent work includes a unique pair of circular prints that demonstrate the shift that occurs when the marks are evenly weighted, colored, and embossed. The paper is accordingly adjusted in tone and texture to harmonize with the image so as not become a sculptural object in itself. These patterns resonate with a chromatic intensity between image and medium rather than the textural vibration of the surface drawings. Incorporating the influences of philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Giorgio Agamben, Richardson’s work stands at the limit of contentless abstraction without jeopardizing the subjective elements of emotion, communication, and imagination. —*Cliff Lauson*