

44.

**15399Φ**

1999

Signed and titled on the reverse

Pencil on unbleached paper

45.2 × 58.8 cm / 17¾ × 23¼ in

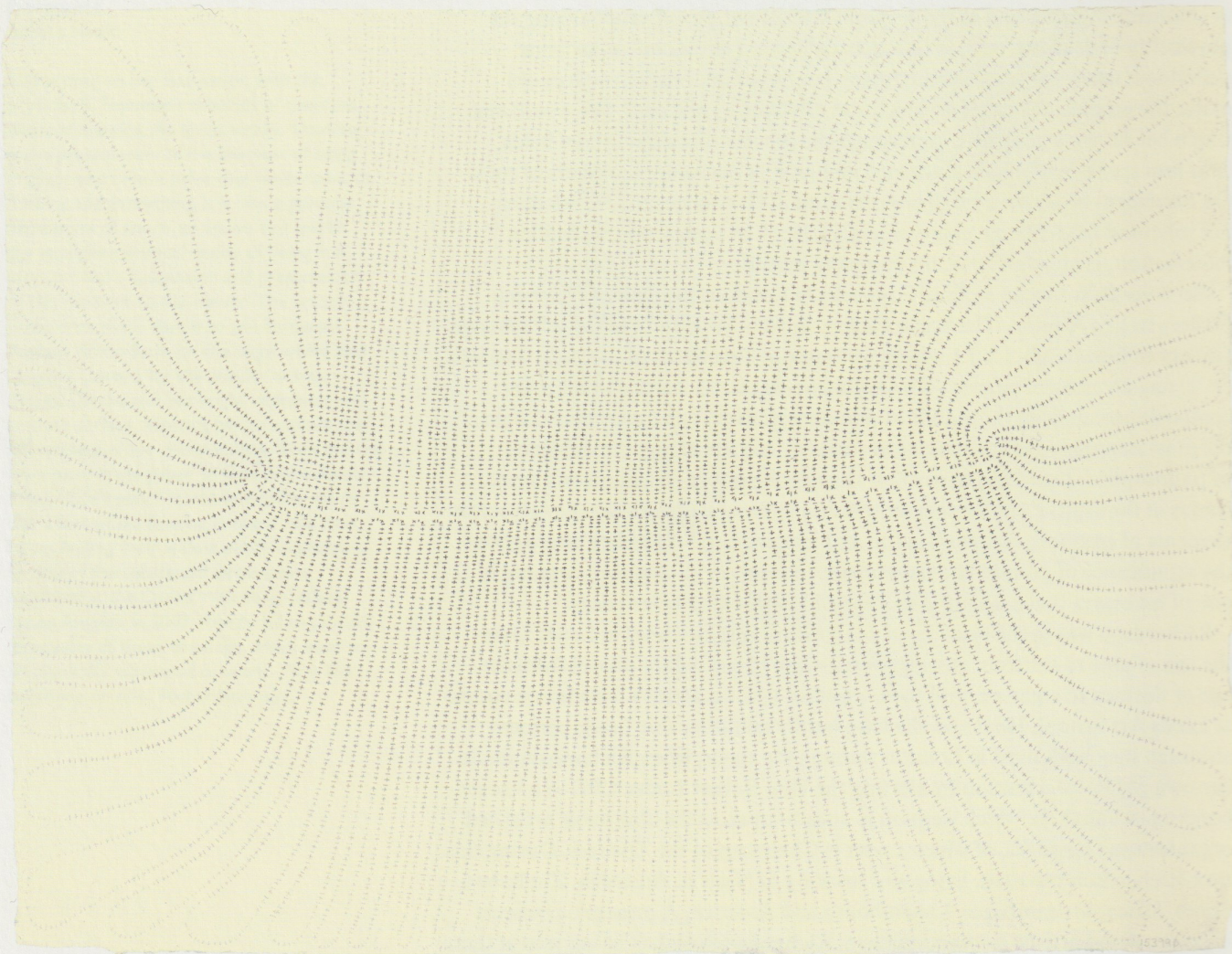
Provenance

Artist's studio

Richardson's early use of unbleached paper, with its imprecise shape and tactile surface, invites organic expression, using the + and – signs which she adopted as her chosen motif in 1997 (and continues, to date, to explore in all her drawings). At this same time she took to titling her drawings by number, a practice which also continues today. The artist experienced the application of graphite to hand-made paper as a kind of sculptural accumulation, and proposed that 'the positive and negative symbols suggest the idea of magnetic forces, balance, electrical pulses and infinity.' Although Richardson travelled extensively in the 1990s, the connectedness of *15399Φ* to aboriginal motif is, at most, unconscious. The origins of her drawn forms are almost always emotional rather than physical and seldom publicly named – one related drawing of this period is, however, described by Richardson as a veil of tears.



Frances Richardson





Richardson was born Leeds in 1965, the younger of two sisters, and now lives and works in Clapham, south London. She went to art school in Norwich (where she currently teaches part-time), later followed by an MA in sculpture at the Royal College of Art. 'Drawing is my life-line,' Richardson feels, and notes that the sculptures on which she is at present also working are to her a form of three-dimensional drawing. She speaks of the vital significance of tiny differences in character of paper and in the graphite-strength of pencil, emphasising the physicality of drawing, and, in retrospect, detects a strong influence from childhood, when she used to accompany her father on forays to collect old maps, the graphic character of which she still likes a great deal. She would also watch her father, a geologist, go through the process of mapping coal fields, hear him speak of a hidden landscape and look at microscopic slithers of rock. On retirement he set up a small antique shop in Harrogate, and Richardson has inherited from him an ability intently to look at things, seeking hidden information. He died in 2005, his company missed.

Her solo-show venues include Gasworks in London, the Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles, The Scene Gallery in New York and the Corn Exchange Gallery in Edinburgh. Cliff Lauson, a curator at Tate Modern, wrote in *Vitamin D*: 'Using an array of pencils with varying hardness, Richardson builds her compositions up from thousands of minute negative (-) and positive (+) signs, the most minimal of mark-making gestures ... Incorporating the influence of philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Giorgio Agamben, Richardson's work stands at the limit of contentless abstraction without jeopardising the subjective elements of emotion, communication and imagination.' Agamben wrote about the significance of gesture and its intimate connection to language, arguing in one of his essays that drawing is the 'speechless dwelling in language.'

Richardson was in the same form as Damien Hirst at school in Leeds from the age of nine to thirteen, moving on with him to secondary school from the age of thirteen to eighteen, and then, together still, on a year's foundation course at Leeds Art School. Hirst and she have hardly met since this Leeds period – although they both lived in London through the 1990s, when Richardson made her own public intervention by alerting the Hon Robert Loder CBE to a vacant building in Vauxhall, which went on in 1994 to open as the charitable artist-led organisation Gasworks, of which Loder is Chairman of the Trustees. During this time Richardson travelled, living and working in Nigeria, Australia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Luxembourg and America. A principled believer in political and artistic internationalism, Richardson wonders at her retreat these days from the politically active earlier years. She is aware too of the startlingly different paths followed by herself and Hirst, and wonders if this reflects the success of the work or of the system by which it is promoted. Richardson is conscious of being a roaming satellite to the art-throng, working long hours in solitude in her Clapham Common flat, on sets of patterned drawings in which she sees herself able to 'offer a slice of what I feel it is to be.'

After beginning with number-drawings, when Richardson moved on in 1997 to the use of plus and minus signs she promptly found her own voice, and has developed this way of working ever since. Some of her drawings are exploratory



45.

170406

2007

Signed and titled on the reverse

Pencil on paper

49.5 × 29.9 cm / 19½ × 11¾ in

Provenance

Artist's studio

Elaborating on her fascination with the physicist R. Feynman's theories of quantum electrodynamics, the artist writes: 'Drawing is the presentation of the moment of being in space and time: a pulse that tends towards nothing and everything. It is also a gestural act: a point of touch, an action that marks the intangible physical reality of being in a moment and a suspension and presentation of this moment to the viewer.' The artist's preference these days is to use Somerset Radiant White Satin for the large works and Magnani Corona for the smaller works, chosen for the soft yet bright whiteness and smooth surface, allowing her to explore the full subtlety of her mark-making. Since moving from hand-made paper to satin finish sheets, Richardson's pencil marks feel to her more like 'a force-field floating in space', the new forms finding their widest public expression to date in the substantial circle series exhibited at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles in 2007. Words fail to capture the quality of these drawings, which need to be physically witnessed to work – 'It is like breathing on skin,' Richardson says.





designs for larger scale 'architectural' pieces, but the majority have been created in sets of variations on a single theme, such as the moon, or playing cards, or currencies. The largest pieces are usually drawn onto many-times gessoed panels of birch-ply, on the delicately textured surface of which the graduated pencil marks seem almost to move, as if floating on the swell of the sea, whilst gaining an unexpected clarity when viewed from a distance. Some of the bigger drawings on paper have the physical feel, in their execution, of spots of heat expanding, shaping the unplanned patterns, a form of internal mapping. Richardson has often tried to introduce colour to her drawings, but always returns to her sheaf of lead pencils.

For five years Richardson used hand-made paper, beginning with linear compositions, the action of drawing feeling like a kind of walk, this form moving rapidly on to a long period of topographical coverage of the surface. Recently she has been working on a new series of drawings on satin finish paper, some of which are very large, 'exploring the edges and moving away from the Platonic perfection of the enclosed form.' Despite the absence of identifiable form, these are emotionally moving works, many of them imbued with a spirit of contained melancholy. Avis Newman, a London-based American artist for whom drawing has always been a central activity, noted in selecting the Tate show *The Stage of Drawing* (2004) that she has 'always felt that the gestural acts of drawing are essentially melancholic.'



