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## Amba Sayal-Bennett's Functional Notations

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<https://ocula.com/magazine/insights/amba-sayal-bennetts-functional-notations/>



Amba Sayal-Bennett's practice is grounded in acts of translation. Whether hand-drawing a design made using the Rhino computer-aided design application on paper, or transforming a drawing into sculptural media, large-scale installation, or overhead projection.<sup>1</sup>

Defined by lines diagramming oblique relations between body and mind, machine and organism, structure and system, the artist's 'machinic forms' feature in new works on paper showing in *A Track to Bare*, a solo online presentation with Dubai-based gallery Carbon 12 (6–20 March 2021).

Resembling engineering blueprints, works like *Rev* (2021), an isometric view of what resembles an android's torso with a turning cog for a heart, and *Script* (2021), whose form appears like a bionic spine, toe a human and non-human line. Considered the products of a 'coupling' between the artist and 'material devices'—mainly ink, pro-marker, and graphite pens and pencils—each drawing reflects an intuitive process that is likened to an unveiling.

The image emerges, or is produced, from an accumulation of marks that recall what the artist has said about 'repetition in science' as 'a means of verifying hypothesis'—'it can be an industrial and mechanized act, but it can also be meditative, ritualistic and performative.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, works like *Sama* (2021), fashioned like an intricate, somewhat old-fashioned vacuum cleaner (Jeff Koons' 'New Hoover Convertibles' come to mind), and the pump-like *Tam* (2021) take on a mechanistic and autochthonous aura at once, recalling earlier drawings like *Sanza* (2019), with amoeba-like forms contained in an altar-esque frame suggesting ancient and modern rites.

It is telling that post-modern architect James Stirling is an influence, whose futurist forms are as lauded for their innovation as they are critiqued for their impractical failures, which in turn recalls Sayal-Bennett's description of her work as 'defunct-utopic and retro-futuristic'.<sup>3</sup> The artist resided in The Florey Building, which Stirling designed in 1966, while studying her BFA at Oxford University.

Stirling's architectural drawings speak to the clean angles, shapes, and curves formed in Sayal-Bennett's lines, gesturing towards what Stirling once said about The Florey: that it was 'the particular way in which functional-symbolic elements are put together that may be the 'art' in the architecture'.<sup>4</sup>

That functional symbolism feeds into Sayal-Bennett's inquiry into how art can operate as a tool and producer of theory and method rather than an aestheticisation of it, which she formalised in a PhD in Art Practice and Learning at Goldsmiths.

Through a melding of associations, infused with the aesthetics of design, engineering and urban planning, the grounded otherworldliness of Sayal-Bennett's drawings emerge from a consideration of the practice as a reach into the future. To consider drawing as a gesture located at the edge of now relates to the references conjured in the resulting encounters between images and viewers, with diagrammatic abstractions functioning as an ever-expanding semantic web.

Sayal-Bennett's projections exemplify this broad-brush approach, with overhead projectors transferring drawing scans on acetate into space, their light falling upon material elements including objects, paper, or tape to inform layered compositions hitting the projected surface.

The result, in the case of say *Manta* (2016), is an expanded drawing in every sense, maximising form and potential meaning in an image that stretches across the floor before curving up a bare wall, passing folds of pink card and sloping white sheets on its ascent.

For the artist, such projections map an interaction between space, object, and body; what she has come to think of as 'a cybernetic system' involving 'an ongoing process of human material engagement and feedback.'<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, while Sayal-Bennett's work has been likened to the designs of Ettore Sottsass—in particular three-dimensional 'drawings' like *Knat* (2018), in which cut and painted MDF wood form what appears like an abstracted rocket—there is a strong conceptual connection across the artist's translated formats with the graphic score, in which drawings become notations for musicians to interpret.

Take the epic *Treatise* (1963–1967) by Cornelius Cardew, a flow of lines forming patterns and shapes across 193 pages, which has been described as the 'longest and most elaborate piece of graphic music ever made.'<sup>6</sup>

Sayal-Bennett has talked about her interest in notation, and how line, colour, and tone constitute a 'formal language' that she uses to investigate the reduction of 'phenomenological experiences like sound, touch or movement into a kind of code.'<sup>7</sup>

This code centres on a form of writing unbound by concrete language, or to borrow Sayal-Bennett's words, 'fixity', in a practice she conceives as 'a continuing, fluid and dynamic process.'<sup>8</sup>—[O]

1 Carbon 12, 'Artist Insight' video on the occasion of the exhibition *PLANE MAKER* (22 May–5 September 2017): <https://www.carbon12.art/video/12/>.

2 Vanessa Murrell, 'Amba Sayal-Bennett: Objectivity, otherness and abstraction', *DATEAGLE ART*, 25 October 2020, <https://dateagle.art/amba-sayal-bennett-interview/>.

3 Interview with Amba Sayal-Bennett, # *Horst und Edeltraut*, Accessed 4 March 2021, <http://www.horstunedeltraut.com/defunct-utopic-and-retro-futuristic-amba-sayal-bennett/>.

4 Biography of James Stirling, *The Pritzker Architecture Prize*, Accessed 4 March 2021, <https://www.pritzkerprize.com/biography-james-stirling>.

5 Carbon 12, 'Artist Insight' video on the occasion of the exhibition *PLANE MAKER* (22 May–5 September 2017): <https://www.carbon12.art/video/12/>.

6 Brian Dennis, 'Cardew's "Treatise" (mainly the visual aspects)', *Tempo*, No. 177 (June 1991): p.10.

7 Cajsá Carlson, 'Amba Sayal-Bennett at the London Art Fair', *Cool Hunting*, 23 January 2015, <https://coolhunting.com/culture/interview-amba-sayalbennett/>; and Carbon 12, 'Artist Insight' video on the occasion of the exhibition *PLANE MAKER* (22 May–5 September 2017): <https://www.carbon12.art/video/12/>.

8 Cajsá Carlson, 'Amba Sayal-Bennett at the London Art Fair', *Cool Hunting*, 23 January 2015, <https://coolhunting.com/culture/interview-amba-sayalbennett/>; and Interview with Amba Sayal-Bennett, # *Horst und Edeltraut*, Accessed 4 March 2021, <http://www.horstunedeltraut.com/defunct-utopic-and-retro-futuristic-amba-sayal-bennett/>.