In the work of the German-born artist Esther Kläs, drawing and sculpture are unstable categories. Rather than treating the two as independent practices within her wider body of work—each with its own internal limits and definitions—Kläs creates a fluid exchange between the vocabularies of two-dimensional and three-dimensional production. Ideas of scale and spatial relationships, for example, are just as relevant to her drawing practice as they are to her solemn and totemic sculptures, which often evoke two-dimensional marks pulled into three-dimensional space. This integration of drawing and sculptural practices stems from their shared use as tools for charting the experience of the body within the world. Kläs’s work is non-figurative, but the body is often evoked in the scale of her sculptures, and the recorded gestures within her monumental drawings.

Drawing is most often thought to be a stationary activity. Standing or sitting, the artist moves their hand according to careful observation or expressive force. Esther Kläs’s approach, however, imbues the process with a physicality and mobility that draws from the legacy of Action Painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Understanding the materiality of paint as a medium that can drip, splatter, and convey the mark of a brush, the Action Painters viewed their expressive and abstract paintings as visual records of the body’s movement in space. Similarly, Kläs’s drawings—colorful combinations of thin lines and organic shapes rendered on a white background—may be read as a system of signs which refers back to the artist’s body in motion and the physical manipulation of the drawing’s constituent materials.

BA/JJ-J (fig. 1) exemplifies Kläs’s embodied and innovative drawing practice. The large-scale drawing consists of three sheets of paper displayed in a row. Colorful arcs span the pages and link together opaque ovoid shapes, which evoke the human body on both microscopic and macroscopic levels in the form of chromosomes and footprints. Using a loofah, Kläs stamped these shapes directly onto the page, then created a mirror reflection.

fig. 1: Esther Kläs, BA/JJ-J, 2013, oil-based ink and colored pencil on paper, 79 1/2 x 177 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.
by pressing a second sheet of paper onto the wet paint. In Kläs’s work, much like in traditional methods of drawing, the elements of line, color, and shape accumulate onto the page. But her procedure in BA/JJ-J introduces both a printmaker’s and a sculptor’s touch into the act of creation, as she creates duplicates and manipulates the paper to achieve the desired graphic effect.

Within the white spaces of Kläs’s drawings, we also see a sculptor’s sensitivity to the relationship between form and space. Her gestures appear to float above a neutral and expansive background. In this sense, Kläs’s marks are more than visual records of past movement; they are also explorations of the interplay between elements in a particular space. With her drawings, the entities are the marks on the space of the paper, while in her sculptural work, the three-dimensional forms activate the space of the gallery (fig. 2).

PART 3 (fig. 3) is a sculpture group that consists of five aluminum rings displayed on the floor and one vertical monolith. This freestanding, columnar form is a recurring element in Kläs’s three-dimensional practice, and is typically built to the scale of the artist’s own six-foot frame. The human proportions once again

fig. 2: Esther Kläs, 0/6 (rumba), 2013, concrete, bronze, pigment, and steel cables, 129 7/8 x 76 3/8 x 47 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kolumba, Köln. Photograph by Lothar Schnepf.
signal the presence of the artist’s body in motion, as Kläs states that “…it is easier for me to have a dialogue with something I can move around.”¹ Conjuring archaic and mysterious presences, Kläs’s monoliths strike an appearance similar to artifacts, relics, or architectural remnants, their physicality and austerity betraying a resemblance to the ruins of Stonehenge and the severe Doric columns of ancient Greece. In PART 3, the heavily textured, rectilinear monolith rises next to the smooth aluminum rings in a stark juxtaposition of orientation, shape, and texture. The viewer contemplates these contrasting formal and spatial relationships of the piece within the context of the gallery space. Each individual element of PART 3 in particular, and Kläs’s group sculptures in general, comes together to engender an altered environment within which the viewer locates himself.

Ferma (5) (fig. 4) was created for the sixteenth iteration of deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum’s PLATFORM series, which invites emerging artists to engage with the Museum’s unique landscape through site-specific installations and outdoor sculptures. For her project, Kläs has installed two planar granite forms just inside the forested-edge of the Sculpture Park. Resting on the earth and largely hidden from view, Ferma (5) is meant to

---

¹: Kläs, p. 11.
be discovered, evoking associations with architectural ruins and stone-laid pathways.

The coarse surfaces of Ferma (5) are punctured with drilled holes and scored with straight channels, creating a system of voids and lines that is also present in Kläs’s drawings. Interspersed throughout BA/Y (fig. 5), for example, are vertical lines that bend as they move downward, as well as four dark blue circles. In Ferma (5), the richly textured forms of the roughly hewn granite are activated by their surrounding natural conditions. Light is filtered through the overhanging tree canopy directly above the sculpture, overlaying its own pattern of void and presence onto the work, while leaves, twigs, and earth drift onto the low-lying plinths. This symbiosis between the sculpture and the larger environment is an important feature of Kläs’s work, which exerts its influence upon the spectator while simultaneously pronouncing itself as integral to the surrounding space. In a 2011 interview, Kläs states: “The sculpture determines the place of the viewer in the space around it. But it is also about making the work, which doesn’t need the viewer. Imagine the work all alone in the space at night when it’s dark and it would still be fine because it has a life and place of its own.”

fig. 4: Esther Kläs, Ferma (5), 2015, granite, 173 x 65 x 11 inches overall. Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.
Consideration of the viewer’s relationship in space to *Ferma (5)* would have been present throughout Kläs’s planning process for the sculpture, and a determining factor in such formal properties as the overall dimensions of the plinths. At deCordova, a specific site becomes animated and altered through the introduction of *Ferma (5)*, and viewers are invited to consider their relationship to the granite tablets, as well as the sculpture’s place within the canopied environment.

–Nate Jones, Curatorial Intern

---


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This project was realized through the assistance of Peter Blum Gallery, NY, Frank Harrigan, P.E., and LeMasurier Granite Quarry, Inc., North Chelmsford, MA.

PLATFORM
PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England and the world, that engage with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series is intended as a support for creativity and the expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

BIOGRAPHY
Esther Kläs was born in 1981 in Mainz, Germany. She received her MFA from Hunter College in New York City, where she currently lives and works. Kläs’s work has been featured at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium; MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY; Marino Marini Museum, Florence, Italy; Yvon Lambert, Paris, France; and other museums and galleries in Europe and North America. She received a Tony Smith Award in 2010. Her work will be included in deCordova’s exhibition Drawing Redefined: Roni Horn, Esther Kläs, Joëlle Tuerlinckx, Richard Tuttle, and Jorinde Voigt on view from October 2, 2015 to March 20, 2016.

FEVERARY 2015–JUNE 2016

deCordova | Sculpture Park and Museum
51 Sandy Pond Road
Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773
781.259.8355  decordova.org