

What  
drawing  
can be  
four responses

# Intro

*What drawing can be: four responses* features site-specific installations by artists Jillian Conrad, Teresita Fernández, Tony Lewis, and Constantin Luser. Each has a gallery space to respond to the question “what can drawing be?” and to explore drawing’s conceptual and material potential, its boundaries, and its connections with other art forms, such as sculpture and architecture. Even though they have different backgrounds, sensibilities, and approaches, the four artists embrace expansive notions of drawing, eluding set definitions, materials, and techniques. Their installations at the Menil Drawing Institute pose a rich array of aesthetic questions, notably about their drawings’ relationship to scale, space, nature, motion, ephemerality, mark-making, language, and perception, thus opening new formal and expressive possibilities.

This exhibition is not intended to offer a complete narrative; instead, it highlights some of the ways contemporary artists challenge the traditional boundaries of the medium. While attempting to take stock of this impulse and its manifestation in today’s artistic practice, the show makes a case for the continuing relevance, agility, and vitality of drawing.

The exhibition opens with an installation by Constantin Luser, whose practice resonates with early 20th-century explorations of how drawing might leap off the page to become three dimensional. Luser’s delicate filigree sculptures, which he refers to as “spatial drawings,” are constructed from brass wires. A selection of these pieces, specifically created for this display, float and shift in space, casting shadows and creating a complex visual exchange with a drawing made directly on the walls in response to the sculptural elements and their shadows.

While Luser’s intricately formed artworks gradually emerge and recede from perception, Tony Lewis’s contribution to the exhibition traffics in visual, perhaps even physical, overwhelm. Lewis’s drawing repertoire is ever-expanding, a testament to his observation

that graphite powder—one of his primary mediums—is inherently unruly. For this display, Lewis has selected various forms of drawing among the many in his practice, including a dimensional drawing of a stenographic shorthand made with screws and string, and a massive graphite-laden sheet of paper—weighing approximately fifty pounds—crushed inside of a transparent box.

Jillian Conrad's engagement with drawing is similarly vast. Primarily known as a sculptor, Conrad's view of drawing is tightly bound with ideas about language and thresholds, exploring the moment and way in which one thing might unexpectedly morph into another. For example, when might a word become a drawing? Could a drawing be found within and traced upon tree bark? Such questions animate Conrad's poetic view of materials, and by extension, the world.

The exhibition concludes with an installation by Teresita Fernández, whose practice is conceptually dense and materially rich. Often looking to the landscape for inspiration, Fernández's work challenges conventional understandings of place-making and mapping, uncovering narratives often rooted in colonialism and violence. Fernández's use of charcoal responds to these concerns, as she creates an immersive environment that showcases both the material's ability to create ethereal and suggestive marks, as well as its physical solidity and scorched-earth quality.

The Menil Drawing Institute was established in 2008 in recognition of drawing's crucial role in modern and contemporary artistic culture. *What drawing can be: four responses* should be considered an integral part of how the institute responds to the centrality of drawing for many artists and the experimental ways in which they stretch its definition.

# Constantin Luser

Constantin Luser first trained in industrial design, and he has since worked across mediums including drawing, sculpture, and sound. He creates kinetic wire pieces that cast elaborate shadows and inspire delicate line drawings in installations that challenge and delight visitors' perceptions.

While his practice is multidisciplinary, it is partly grounded in a particular aspect of the history of drawing, namely its tendency to shift from the narrow confines of a traditional medium into an expanded field. Starting in the late 1920s, artists such as Alexander Calder, Pablo Picasso, and Julio González began to move beyond the sheet of paper to explore the idea of "drawing in space." In the 1960s, artists like Dorothea Rockburne and Sol LeWitt pushed the parameters of the medium to include text, folded papers, and drawings on the wall. Working within this context, Luser creates delicate, perplexingly detailed contour drawings out of thin brass wire that are almost devoid of substance. "The slightest air circulation makes them spin. As a result, they are always in motion and escape what makes two-dimensional drawing fixed," he noted. For this installation, Luser responded to the contours of his wire pieces by drawing on the surrounding walls to amplify the networks of lines and cast shadows, complicating the viewer's perception. "I draw with several pens simultaneously, this produces a blurring effect.... Your eye can no longer distinguish between individual lines and tells the brain that you have a visual defect—so that the drawing appears spatial."

Luser lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

Constantin Luser  
*Garden for Shadows  
and Vibrations,*  
2024–25 (detail)  
Brass and pen  
Courtesy of the artist  
© Constantin Luser



# Tony Lewis

Tony Lewis engages the drawing medium in expanded ways, using graphite powder and torn paper to confront social and political questions of race, power, communication, and labor. His materials provide a literal and conceptual foundation for his work, as they are stretched, smudged, rubbed, spliced, and folded across a variety of handmade and found surfaces.

Here, Lewis brings together multiple types of drawing that he has been investigating. The first is a wall drawing rendered in black screws threaded with graphite-soaked nylon strings. This labor-intensive work is based on motifs taken from a late 19th-century stenographic manual, which features a set of shorthand lines that correspond to spoken words. Struck by the fluid expressive scrawls, Lewis uses them as an opportunity to form a new relationship with language that is both material and abstract. The installation also includes an enormous graphite powder drawing on construction paper, which the artist had installed elsewhere and subsequently folded up. Due to the object's size and weight, the folding and movement of the piece inevitably caused some damage. At the Menil, the work is displayed in a vitrine, which completes its transformation into a new work in a new space. On the floor underneath is a mound of graphite flakes, evoking a work of Land Art by artist Robert Smithson. A loud-speaker embedded within the work plays Lewis's decade-long listening project that examines a 1965 debate between political commentator William F. Buckley Jr. and author James Baldwin.

Lewis lives and works in Chicago.

Above  
Tony Lewis  
*Charlatan Slightly Muffled*, 2025  
Screws, string, graphite powder, and graphite spray  
Courtesy of the artist  
© Tony Lewis

Below  
*Charlatan Slightly Muffled*, 2025 (detail)



# Jillian Conrad

Jillian Conrad explores questions of materiality and intangibility in her art. Her sculptures and works on paper often engage aspects of the landscape and commonplace materials, with the goal of locating thresholds between visible and invisible forces.

In this installation, Conrad presents drawing as a star map, drawing as found in nature, and drawing as a kind of language. In *Cetus*, she evokes the constellation named for a mythical sea monster, recreating it here out of jewelry chains and glass orbs, anchored by asphalt rocks. For Conrad, constellations represent some of the earliest known drawings, with cultures all over the globe “connecting points of light in the air above us with imaginary lines to orient ourselves and learn how celestial bodies move.” This interest in the ways in which people project their desires into the world through mark-making comes to the fore in *Letter*, based on a bundle of recently discovered, 18th-century love letters to French sailors that lay unopened for hundreds of years. Moved by the sentence, “I would gladly spend the night writing to you,” penned by a woman to her husband, Conrad shaped each word with pewter, a malleable metal alloy, in both the original French and its English translation, and wove it into a net so that it appears like seaweed or other suspended detritus. Conrad’s other works on view similarly explore the motifs of nature, intimacy, and alchemy.

Conrad lives and works in Houston.

Jillian Conrad  
*Letter*, 2025 (detail)  
Cotton, chain, pewter,  
ostrich feathers, and  
thread  
Courtesy of the artist  
© Jillian Conrad





# Teresita Fernández

Teresita Fernández is known for her public installations and large-scale sculptures. Her art offers an expansive view of the land and landscape, from the intimacy of a familiar place to the abstraction of national borders, from the subterranean to the cosmic, and of the more elusive, psychic environments we carry in ourselves. Issues of power, colonization, visibility, and erasure are important preoccupations of hers.

For her site-specific wall drawing at the Menil, Fernández extends her ongoing interest in what she refers to as “stacked landscapes,” her term for the ways in which terrain and materials extracted from the land such as charcoal (typically burned wood or other organic matter) can hold deep histories of Indigenous knowledge alongside colonial violence. Here, the viewer stands amid an immersive environment that evokes a cross section of the Earth, with the strata of the planet’s inner core and mantle giving way to the thick, outer shell of rock and then up to the horizon line and sky. Made entirely of charcoal, from the solid deposits chained together like little islands to the smoke-like wisps building and rising to the ceiling and rhythmically recurring to the floor, Fernández’s work unravels standard modes of viewing the landscape and imagining our place within it. “I am interested in the idea that you are an extension of the landscape, that you are a part of it and it is part of you. You look at landscape, but it also looks back at you.”

Fernández lives and works in Brooklyn.

Teresita Fernández  
*Scorched Earth*  
(*Lament*), 2025 (detail)  
Charcoal  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Lehmann Maupin,  
New York, Seoul, and  
London  
© Teresita Fernández



*What drawing can be: four responses* is curated by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute, and Kelly Montana, Associate Curator, Menil Drawing Institute.

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#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events take place in the Menil Drawing Institute unless otherwise noted.

#### SOUND ACTIVATION

Constantin Luser

Saturday, March 22, 3–5 p.m.

#### ARTIST TALK

Teresita Fernández

Thursday, April 24, 7–8 p.m.

Main Building

#### LECTURE

A Memorial Lecture on Bernice Rose

Thursday, May 8, 7–8 p.m.

#### ARTIST TALK

Jillian Conrad

Thursday, May 15, 7–8 p.m.

#### WORKSHOP

Drawing Space

Saturday, July 26, 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

#### CURATOR TALK

Edouard Kopp

Sunday, August 3, 3–3:30 p.m.

All programs are free and open to everyone.

Additional programming information can be found at [menil.org/events](https://menil.org/events).

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To learn more and join, please visit [menil.org/support](https://menil.org/support).

Exhibition dates

March 21–August 10, 2025

All photographs by Caroline Philippone

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Menil Drawing Institute